

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

MAKING DO IN THE PROMISED LAND:
ETHICS OF AMBIVALENCE AMONG CHICAGO'S NEW AFRICANS

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For Mimie

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INTRODUCTION

The Work of Migration During Times of Crisis

For where does one run to when he's already in the promised land?

—Claude Brown, *Manchild in the Promised Land*, 1965

Like ants, eat little and carry the rest back to your home.

—Bembe Proverb

Thanksgiving—that quintessentially American tribute to prosperity—is a popular holiday among the Africans I know in Chicago. I discovered this on a grey day in 2012, when I was invited to do the rounds with Amina. We met in the afternoon at her hair braiding salon on the South Side of Chicago, where she had already put in ten hours of work, preparing women for the holidays.

Amina's business was in a dilapidated strip mall on the far Southwest Side of Chicago, in a middle-class African American community that had seen better days. The plate glass windows were plastered with glamorous posters of African women with elaborate coiffures, emblazoned with Amina's name hand-painted in red. As with many businesses in the neighborhood, the door had a security grille and remained locked. Patrons rang the doorbell and were buzzed in.

The salon was small but comfortable, a room for living in. There was a long couch against the window, a huge, wide-screen television, three beauty stations, and a computer desk piled high with papers. An alcove behind the television had just space enough for a mini-fridge, a microwave oven, and an industrial sewing machine, which Amina rented part-time to a tailor from Mali. The walls were covered with mirrors, sundresses for sale, and polished fashion photographs of Amina and her friends. I would meet most of these women, all fellow braiders who had posed for these publicity shots during hair shows sponsored by their own association.

Amina proudly brought up the website of the professional association of hair braiders that she had organized. “We’ve got about fifty dues-paying members now. About ten of them are African Americans, trained by us.” She left me to explore the site while she attended to a series of visitors: first a Chinese hair supplier, who brought her cut-rate hair extensions; then a woman from Côte d’Ivoire, who needed help registering her childcare business; and then a man from Benin who wanted to have some documents translated from French into English. Then a client walked in with a hair emergency that required immediate attention. An hour later, she was finally free.

“It’s getting late,” she grumbled as we rushed out the door. “I just can’t say no.” She said this with a touch of empathy, as though she were offering a public service to her clients, though we both knew she needed the money. Her credit in the U.S. was in bad shape due to a pending foreclosure, so she had recently taken out a loan from a bank in Senegal. She needed to finance her recovery strategy, and they had been eager to lend her money based on her mother’s house in Dakar, tax returns for a U.S.-based business, and five pounds of gold jewelry as collateral. Amina was thinking of renting space for a boutique in Dakar and had already invested in part of a shipping container full of apparel from China. But she didn’t want to wait for the merchandise to arrive before settling that debt. She didn’t trust exchange rates or the bank, for that matter. She was planning to pay in full when we got to Dakar, shortly before Christmas.

“Are you going to have enough money?” I asked her.

She laughed. “They have my jewelry.”

We had many stops to make that went late into the night. Amina’s years of service work and business deals had swathed her in a fabric of connections that she attended to with all the care that she lavished on her *couture sénégalaise*. Of all her enterprises, this took priority and

was in fact one of the pretexts for the day's agenda. Many of the women that we would see that evening had down payments for *boubous* that Amina would painstakingly construct from magazine cuttings and sample swatches. We would be traveling together to West Africa, where she would personally oversee the dye process in Bamako, and then work closely with tailors and *brodeurs* in Dakar to design one-of-a-kind creations. This labor of love represented a small fraction of the activity through which Amina supported herself, her children, and other kin in New York, Paris, and Dakar. In addition to hair braiding and retail sales, she was an experienced legal advocate and served as a court interpreter with her knowledge of four languages. She also had an associate's degree in business administration and was planning to get a degree in social work.

The period between 2010 and 2016, when I was conducting my fieldwork, was a time of exceptional economic precarity in the United States. Like many of the family, friends, and incidental acquaintances with whom her life was entangled, Amina coped by mobilizing her portfolio of skills and abilities to access resources for herself and others. She was always at work, not only at the income-generating labor of hair braiding and trading, but also by offering to others gifts of translation, mediation, and emotional support at critical moments in their lives. In the trenches of everyday *debrouillardise*,¹ casual acquaintances could be as important as lifelong intimates, and entrenched animosities were often sidelined by the exigencies of the moment. As part of a variegated, resilient web of relations that spanned three continents, Amina's local interactions had global scale. Her efforts operated in a register that was simultaneously affective and calculated, sincere and instrumental, motivated towards ends that were constantly being adjusted to fit the circumstances.

¹ *Se debrouiller*: to manage, to make ends meet, to make do.

Many hair braiders were at work that Thanksgiving. We visited four shops on our way westward toward the inner ring suburb where we attended the first of three parties. Sandrine and her sisters, who were from Cote d'Ivoire, had prepared a feast of rice, greens, *fufu*, and turkey for guests from seven countries. Some of them had driven in for the weekend from Wisconsin, Indiana, and Ohio. After about an hour we left for a *sabaar*—a Senegalese dance party—at a restaurant on the South Side of the city. Then we went to a downtown church where the Burkinabe Association was hosting a fundraiser. Amina attempted to orient me throughout the evening by murmuring into my ear discreetly, at opportune moments, an array of associations that shared in their bewildering detail that common point of reference, “Africa,” as though it were the same hometown. She rarely mentioned what her friends did for a living unless I asked. Hair braider or taxi driver, accountant, mechanic, home healthcare worker, data analyst, babysitter, cook, college professor: none of these titles described who they were. They were identified to me on the basis of family relationships or with a story that described how they met, and I often had to guess or press to learn their countries of origin.

Conversations that evening swelled with the Afro-optimism that was spreading among their relations at home as record growth rates in much of sub-Saharan Africa attracted foreign investment in communications, banking and retail.² Debates circled around the irony that, having relocated to the wealthiest country in the world, they were struggling with immigration, foreclosure, and economic hardship, not to mention racial profiling, police harassment, and hostility towards foreigners. The contrast was stark: while surveys and editorials in the *New York*

² Private consulting firms generated numerous reports during that period encouraging investments in African frontier economies, such as the McKinsey Global Institute's *Lions on the Move: The Progress and Potential of African Economies* (2010) and Deloitte and Touche, *Deloitte on Africa: The Rise and Rise of the African Middle Class* (2012). See “Foreign Investment in Africa: A Sub-Saharan Scramble,” *The Economist*, January 24, 2015.

Times reported persistent unemployment, rising welfare enrollments, and child poverty in the United States, predictions of imminent fortunes abroad tapped into my interlocutors' "nostalgia for the future" and redirected their own strategies of aspirational investment.³ Even as their income plummeted, they continued to send monthly remittances abroad, prioritizing informal debt obligations even when it implied default of commercial loans in the U.S. They were putting their money where the future lies, virtually speaking, by investing Africa's "new middle class."

If Africa were rising, as they seemed to agree, why did they leave? How did they get to the United States? What happened when they arrived, and how have these experiences influenced expectations for return? These three questions initiated my ethnographic fieldwork among francophone Africans in the Chicago area. I was interested in challenging the categorical distinction, often made in migration policy debates, between "immigrant integration"—a commitment to identification with an adopted nation—and "circular migration"—temporary work abroad to support a future at home. Social scientists often classify migrants according to a primary motivation for moving.⁴ But migration is not always the consequence of fixed intentions. It may be experienced less as a discrete event than as a process demanding plasticity: a mutable yet resilient sense of self that retains its form yet is never quite the same.⁵ Histories of mobility within Africa and beyond—through extended kinship networks, labor migration, or in response to conflict—create patterns of multi-sited residency offering a range of opportunities to

³ See Catherine Rampell, "In Job Market Shift, Some Workers Are Left Behind," *New York Times*, May 12, 2010; Binyamin Applebaum and Robert Gebeloff, "Even Critics of Safety Net Increasingly Depend on It," *New York Times*, February 11, 2012); and Motoko Rich, "Percentage of Poor Students in Public Schools Rises," *New York Times*, January 16, 2015.

⁴ A classic review of the migration studies paradigm is Douglas S. Massey, "Why Does Immigration Occur? A Theoretical Synthesis," in *The Handbook of International Migration: The American Experience*, ed. Charles Hirschman et al., (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1999).

⁵ Catherine Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012).

individuals over the course of a lifetime.⁶ Accordingly, the “pragmatics of desire” for people who migrate may be improvisational, a leap of faith that bridges a discontinuity of experience. As Julie Chu found for Fujianese aspiring to enter the United States, costs and benefits do not always add up to “a rational, calculative model of ‘risk.’”⁷ This is not only because people have imperfect information or because leaving seems safer than staying. Some emigrants may interpret uncertainty—and their position within it—as a gamble worth making. After all, there can be no winning strategy when the only known is that the future is unknown. When every step is a new throw of the dice, choosing to choose may be a way of making time for new options to appear.

This predicament offers a way to think about everyday life in a world shaped by finance. In this dissertation, I understand finance not merely as a mechanism for the distribution of capital, but also as a way of organizing contingency that points beyond the neoliberal presupposition of market equilibrium. My informants may not be betting on the stock market, yet their economic activities, legal encounters, and social interdependencies are influenced by the centrality of money markets in the global economy. Since currency replaced gold as the epicenter of international trade in the 1970s, financialization has emerged as the dominant regime of capital accumulation, reconfiguring the rules and processes through which we engage with institutions and, to a significant extent, with each other.⁸ Central to today’s political

⁶ Two important analyses of long-distance labor networks are A.L. Epstein et al., “Urbanization and Social Change in Africa,” *Current Anthropology* 8, no. 4 (1967): 275–95 and Michael J. Piore’s *Birds of Passage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

⁷ Julie Y. Chu, *Cosmologies of Credit: Transnational Mobility and the Politics of Destination in China* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 261.

⁸ Gretta Krippner defines financialization as “a broad-based transformation in which financial activities (rather than services generally) have become increasingly dominant in the U.S. economy over the last several decades.” *Capitalizing on Crisis: The Political Origins of the Rise of Finance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011). Also see Gerald A. Epstein, “Financialization and the World Economy,”

economy is a strategy called “arbitrage” in which a disparity in price across markets is identified and eliminated at a profit. Though this term is generally associated with finance, the possibility of arbitrage is fundamental to any market. This is because a market does not exist unless there is a disparity that can be resolved by an exchange. It is often assumed that markets emerge naturally in response to desires. What this common-sense conception often misses, however, is that those desires could be met in other ways or not at all. In fact, the disparity in need of correction does not exist in the absence of a potential exchange. The value that is realized in a market is immanent to the social activity that makes it possible.

What is significant about the concept of arbitrage is its self-referentiality. Arbitrage is an exchange that creates an opportunity that disappears when it is taken. When a relation simultaneously identifies, creates, and realizes value, that relation is interpreted as already having been there. This is a contradiction: the necessary ground that arbitrage presupposes is what it performs as part of a contingent network of relations. This dissertation both applies this contradictory concept and explores how it operates in the lives of my informants and in their relations with rapidly changing institutions. At the center of this transformation is the proliferation of electronic media that extract data from our activities, bodies, and environment. Disaggregated into statistical spreads, this data is not only used to map the landscape of the future; it is also its own landscape, generating maps of prices and policies that convert uncertainty into manageable risk. Economic, political, and cultural processes have gradually converged around this technology, eroding the liberal distinction between public and private

in *Financialization and the World Economy*, ed. G.A. Epstein (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2005); Adam Tooze, *Crashed: How a Decade of Financial Crises Changed the World* (New York: Penguin, 2018); and Martin Konings, *The Development of American Finance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

spheres. Governance becomes logistics, a derivation and operationalization of the modern logic that rationalized moral economies. Whereas self-governance is a reflexive process involving critique, debate, and reform, effective logistical systems are recursive machines that change in response to what changes. Accordingly, today's institutions are best described as an assemblage of practices that manage through arbitrage, deriving gain from the volatility of their own making.

Not only have financialization and the information economy changed social structures, but they have also reconfigured the aspirations that these structures support. The “bio” of biocapital, biopolitics, and biofinance is life as such: non-human species threatened by environmental degradation and their human users whose behaviors are measured and constrained by agencies beyond communication or appeal.⁹ In bureaucracy and on the internet, users continually cross thresholds, providing continuous data as the price of passage. At every threshold they must perform an intention, reading their images in the black mirror of information and seeking an outcome that will allow them to continue to choose. This dissertation describes how workplaces, universities, immigration authorities, and banks determine eligibility for admission based on a portfolio of personal qualities. My informants are not selling themselves, I argue, but leveraging their assets in order to arbitrage thresholds.

In the wake of the 2008 Recession, many migrants were cut off from the livelihoods and living arrangements that they had come to expect as the payoff for having risked emigration. Others never had the chance to reap those rewards and wondered if the gamble had been worth it.

⁹ For theorizations of biopolitics, biocapital, and biofinancialization, see Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79*, trans. G. Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Kaushik Sunder Rajan, *Biocapital: The Constitution of Post-Genomic Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); and Simon Lilley and Dimitris Papadopoulos, “Material Returns: Cultures of Valuation, Biofinancialisation and the Autonomy of Politics,” *Sociology* 48, no. 5 (2014): 972–88.

Very few weathered those years unscathed because those with steady incomes provided support to those who did not. Projects were shelved and trips were canceled, houseguests became roommates, education was deferred in favor of a job. Unable to plot their coordinates because their prospects were unclear, they focused on doing the next right thing. Intentions had not disappeared, but they were deferred in many cases to another time and place. Meanwhile, the informal insurance of migrant networks mitigated downside risks through self-other relationships that generated value by extending spacetime. As Nancy Munn puts it, “people are ‘in’ a sociocultural time of multiple dimensions (sequencing, timing, past-present-future relations, etc.) that they are forming in their ‘projects.’”¹⁰ In this way, my informants arbitrated spacetime as a knowing practice that derived value from uncertainty.

Under the everyday crisis conditions of financial capitalism, the impossibility of self-sovereignty is the condition of possibility for an emergent personhood that cannot realize itself, yet adapts by taking up new opportunities for action. From a subjective standpoint, “choosing to choose” as a bearer of risk in the absence of viable alternatives is the ironic outcome of a neoliberal ideology that assumes the capacity to leverage that risk as part of a trajectory of self-realization. On the other hand, there is no standpoint at all within a system in which finance and law are forms of adaptation that evolve as if by natural selection, leaving those who fall through the cracks to fend for themselves or die trying. A drive through the United States will show that one need not be a migrant to suffer this fate. Nevertheless, when migrants carry their portfolios—often underwritten by obligations to others—into new arenas of social membership, they have weaker legal standing than even the most reckless venture capitalists. The risk is

¹⁰ Nancy D. Munn, “The Cultural Anthropology of Time: A Critical Essay,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 21 (1992): 123.

doubled for Africans in America, who as citizens of the Global South bear the odious debt of their countries of origin, and as black migrants face the stigma of racism. These are the precarious circumstances in which my informants make themselves even as they are being made as migrants, in ways that both enact and subvert the logic of finance.

Making Do in a Risky World

Since World War II, the United States and Africa have represented the opposite extremes of a developmental continuum. Framed by intergovernmental organizations and elaborated by social scientific research, this continuum revised the colonial narrative of civilization as one of modernization.¹¹ The first decade after independence coincided with the postwar industrial growth that the French call “*les trentes glorieuses*.” Western governments invested heavily in African states that would secure their interests and punished those that would not. During the 1970s, however, the emergence of a global monetary regime dramatically altered the political economy supporting this arrangement. Sinking prices on primary commodities were followed by a spike in interest rates on the dollar, inflating African’s sovereign debt. Under the austerity conditions of structural adjustment, international investments—initially framed as a debt to societies that had been ravaged by the slave trade and colonial rule—became the source of further expropriation through the servicing of loans that could never be repaid. Forced to gut public budgets and agree to disadvantageous terms of trade, African states were caught in a cycle of underdevelopment and a “politics of the belly” that fed on disorder, hoarding wealth as a

¹¹ On the history of modernization discourse in the social sciences, see Carl E. Plutsch, “The Three Worlds, or the Division of Social Scientific Labor, Circa 1950-1975,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23, no. 4 (1981): 565–90.

spectacle of absolute power.¹² If the United States was associated with generalized prosperity, Africa was known as a place of enduring crisis, both an exception to the global economy and constitutive of it, a benchmark against which the rest of the world was measured and a project of future integration.

Yet between 2010 and 2016 when I was conducting my fieldwork, everyday life on both continents was undergoing rapid changes. In the United States, the Great Recession of 2007–2008 left thousands of people without jobs, homes, and health insurance. The austerity policies that had been tested in the laboratory of the “third world” had become a standard feature of neoliberal governance, privatizing public functions and shifting the risk of economic volatility onto consumers. The financial sector expanded as growth rates declined, and most jobs were in the service sector at wages that had been stagnating for decades. Widening economic inequality was punctuated by racial violence, accompanied by political polarization over crime and policing on the one hand and immigration on the other, giving rise to conflicts that challenged mythologies of inclusion and progress. Many countries in Africa, on the contrary, had seen a surge in demand for oil and other natural resources, which lined the pockets of African elites and foreign investors eager to exploit new consumer markets on the subcontinent. Cell phones and computers became more widely available, and people flocked to urban areas where luxury high rises and shopping malls blossomed. While communities throughout the United States were showing the wear and tear of deindustrialization, African cities were beginning to look more American, displaying rewards for those able to tap into international financial circuits.¹³

¹² Jean-François Bayart, *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly* (London: Longman, 1993). There were, of course, significant variations in the manifestation of these dynamics across the subcontinent. See Paul Nugent, *Africa Since Independence*, 2nd ed. (London: Red Globe Press, 2012).

¹³ Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the 21st Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014). Considering this growing global inequality, among other trends, Jean and John Comaroff suggest that

Amidst dire prognoses for the future of the American middle class, sub-Saharan Africa had never before inspired such optimism among the architects of global economic integration. Within a few short years, concerns with poor governance and “the poverty trap” gave way to a discourse of epic transition. Growth rates in the double digits resurrected hopes for the convergence of the two remaining worlds, as predicted during more optimistic times.¹⁴ Africa’s growth curve was an “affective lightning rod” for financial market makers with an eye on Africa.¹⁵ Consulting giant McKinsey and Company urged global executives to take heed of “a new commercial vibrancy” that *The Economist* predicted would soon “outpace its Asian counterparts.” This celebratory discourse countered any hint of predation with the language of moral imperative: “working together, business, governments, and civil society can confront the continent’s many challenges and lift the living standards of its people.”¹⁶ It also glossed over governance issues at just the points most sensitive to investors. “While Africa has been badly affected by global recessions in the past,” reported one CEO, “it has entered this one in better shape thanks to a record of improved economic management and good governance in many states.”¹⁷ Walmart’s acquisition of South Africa’s Massmart retail chain attested to its confidence

Euro-America is “evolving” towards Africa. Jean and John Comaroff, *Theory from the South* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Press, 2011).

¹⁴ Walt Rostow wedded the economic and political agendas of international development in an acclaimed series of lectures published in 1960 under the title *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-communist Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960). In 2010, The International Monetary Fund (IMF) projected that by 2015 Africa would account for seven of the ten fastest-growing economies in the world. See IMF, *Regional Economic Outlook: Sub-Saharan Africa, Resilience and Risks* (New York: IMF, 2010).

¹⁵ Caitlin Zaloom describes the yield curve as an “affective lightning rod” among traders in financial markets. “How to Read the Future: The Yield Curve, Affect, and Financial Prediction,” *Public Culture* 21, no. 2 (2009): 247.

¹⁶ See Acha Leke et al., “What’s Driving Africa’s Growth?” *McKinsey Quarterly*, June 1, 2010; and “Lion Kings? Africa is Now One of the World’s Fastest-growing Regions,” *The Economist*, January 6, 2011.

¹⁷ Business Action for Africa, *From Crisis to Opportunity: Harnessing the Power of Business to Sustain Progress Towards the MDGs* (BAA: London, 2009), 16.

in the future of an African consumer class.¹⁸ Once markets were adequately diversified, argued these neoliberal humanitarians, improved infrastructure and employment rates would follow.

However, this growth spurt did not resemble earlier patterns of industrialization. It looked more like a new scramble for Africa, triggered by the expansion of industrial production in China and India. Record growth rates were the consequence of a surge in commodity prices, some economists pointed out, along with a marginal acceleration in countries that were “catching up” after decades of negative growth.¹⁹ Indeed, the most obvious signs of development were not an effect of growth but of speculation on predictions of growth. For example, private investment in infrastructure lowered transportation costs, creating a diffusion effect in resource-poor countries by feeding service industries and cross-border trade.²⁰ Yet, like “jobless growth” in the United States, little of the new wealth reaches most Africans. Resource extraction is capital intensive and imports much of its labor. It is also subject to unpredictable price fluctuations, a dynamic that creates shaky ground for an emerging service sector. Furthermore, the shrunken states of neoliberal Africa were limited in what they could do to help economically marginalized constituencies. In fact, international philanthropists were taking up health and welfare functions

¹⁸ Devon Maylie, “Massmart: Commission Recommends Wal-Mart Takeover,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 15, 2011.

¹⁹ Development economists pointed out that African countries needed to expand by at least 7 percent annually just to keep ahead of the fertility rate. See Alexis Arieff et al., *The Global Economic Crisis: Impact on Sub-Saharan Africa and Global Policy Responses* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2009); and John Weeks, *Employment, Productivity and Growth in Africa South of the Sahara* (London: SOAS, 2010).

²⁰ Dirk Willem Te Velde, *African Growth: Forgotten Issues*, Research Programme Consortium on Improving Institutions for Pro-Poor Growth (IPPG) (Briefing Paper 19, University of Manchester, 2008). In 2009, petroleum products accounted for 92.3 percent of U.S. imports under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA). J. Diamond, *US-Africa Trade Profile* (International Trade Administration, U.S. Department of Commerce, 2009).

while African leaders were encouraged to build a security infrastructure to support the development of capital markets.²¹

While most of the world's financial activity is in the Global North, markets in securities, bonds, insurance, and financial services have been making inroads elsewhere. A development apparatus increasingly geared towards microfinance has integrated small businesses and farms into circuits of credit and debt that are managed by public and private entities at varying scales of operation.²² Likewise, microinsurance contracts linked to indexes such as rainfall, soil moisture, or area-based crop yields represent a profitable source of “risky investment” within derivative markets abroad. However, the greatest source of liquidity in everyday finance is the remittance economy, which pours billions of foreign exchange into African consumer markets each year. International migration is a cross-scalar phenomenon, giving rise to networks that rescale the notion of “community” the way international finance has rescaled “economy” and the governance of climate and migration are rescaling political authority.²³

Despite copious proposals from the cottage industry in “migration and development” for leveraging this untapped resource, most migration finance circulates through informal channels. Anthropologist Keith Hart popularized the term “informal economy” in 1973 to describe the economic activities of West Africans who produce and trade goods and services outside the

²¹ See the collection of papers in Bank for International Settlements, *Financial Market Development, Monetary Policy and Financial Stability in Emerging Market Economies* (Basel, Switzerland: Bank for International Settlements, 2020).

²² See Julia Elyachar, *Markets of Dispossession: NGOs, Economic Development and the State in Cairo* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); and Leigh Johnson, “Index Insurance and the Articulation of Risk-bearing Subjects,” *Environment and Planning* 45 (2013): 2663–81.

²³ Brett Christophers et al., “Stretching Scales? Risk and Sociality in Climate Finance,” *EPA: Economy and Space* 52, no. 1 (2020): 88–110.

purview of the state.²⁴ With the expansion of international markets, unregulated supply chains of trade and trafficking proliferated as the shadow side of globalization. Their growing importance in the Global North, as restructuring firms automate labor-intensive processes, has led international agencies to call structural unemployment an international crisis rather than a regional one.²⁵ At the same time, the stubborn disconnect between economic growth and job creation is still flagged as a uniquely African problem.

Africa has a large and growing labour force and underutilized capacity that can be employed to increase output. The slack in economic activity means that African governments can pursue policies to put these unemployed resources to work without igniting inflation, if this is done with care. These policies can also lay the foundation for structural transformation and long-term, sustainable high-employment-generating economic growth and poverty reduction.²⁶

In other words, Africa has only itself to blame for the superfluity of its masses. Africa's population curse would be its blessing if corrupt and inefficient governments would just facilitate capital accumulation by accelerating domestic enterprise and regional trade. The subcontinent suffers not from the inadequate distribution of global wealth, but from the mismanagement of existing resources. Healthy national economies require political stability, balanced budgets, access to affordable credit, and low transaction costs.

This is the neoliberal lesson that validates the ravages of structural adjustment in the eyes of many observers. To quote John Page, Chief Economist for OECD's Africa Region, "Africa has learnt to trade more effectively with the rest of the world, to rely more on the private sector,

²⁴ Keith Hart, "Informal Income Opportunities and Urban Employment in Ghana," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 11, no. 1 (1973): 61–89. The term was first introduced by William Lewis, *The Theory of Economic Growth* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1955).

²⁵ International Labour Office, *Global Employment Trends for Youth* (Geneva, Switzerland: International Labour Organization, 2010). For a critical analysis of supply-chain capitalism, see Anna Tsing, "Supply Chains and the Human Condition," *Rethinking Marxism* 12, no. 2 (2009): 148–76.

²⁶ Economic Commission for Africa, *Economic Report on Africa: Promoting High-Level Sustainable Growth to Reduce Unemployment in Africa* (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: ECA, 2010), 7.

and to avoid the very serious collapses in economic growth that characterized the 1970s, 1980s and even the early 1990s.”²⁷ Not only did this 2007 statement energetically ignore the imminent failure of the Millennium Development Goals; it also condemned the proponents of aid-based development, who blamed inadequate funding.²⁸ Equating development with growth and attributing growth to better governance, Page was laying the responsibility for African poverty squarely on the shoulders of African leaders. They were past the postcolonial phase, having learned how to leverage their own resources in the global marketplace. As Barack Obama was fond of saying, “Africa’s future is up to Africans.”²⁹

During my fieldwork, this message of self-determination was championed forcefully in newspapers, blogs, and political speeches throughout Africa. As the not-so-new nations celebrated their golden anniversaries, Afro-optimism coalesced around the new struggle for economic independence. As one African Union (AU) official put it: “Africa cannot continue to wait for Partners to find solutions for her development problems, including mobilizing financial resources for her. Bold decisions need to be taken if Africa is to make a significant impact in financing its own programmes and projects.”³⁰ For many countries, harnessing diaspora remittances had become a key strategy to this end. Many presidents established ministries for diaspora affairs and charged them with coordinating professional networks and staging events to

²⁷ “Steady Growth Will Help Africa Realize UN Millennium Goals, says World Bank,” *United Nations News*, November 14, 2007.

²⁸ From the architects of the UN Development Goals, see Jeffrey Sachs, “The Development Challenge,” *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 2 (2007): 78–90; and Dani Rodrik, “Goodbye Washington Consensus, Hello Washington Confusion?” *Journal of Economic Literature* 44, no. 4 (2006): 973–87. For pro and con statements on their costs and benefits, see Tim Dyson, “How to Save a Crowded Planet,” *Population and Development Review* 34, no. 3 (2008): 547–59. Jagdish Bhagwati, “Time for a Rethink,” *Finance and Development*, September 2010.

²⁹ Barack Obama, *Speech before Parliament of Ghana*, July 11, 2009.

³⁰ Statement by Maxwell M. Mkwezalamba, Commissioner for Economic Affairs, African Union, at the Opening of the Extra-Ordinary Conference of African Ministers of Economy and Finance, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, January 14, 2009.

remind ex-patriots of their national duties. Political candidates in states that allowed citizens abroad to vote traveled to the United States and Europe where they met with prominent community leaders and raised funds. As complaints of “brain drain” were eclipsed by the benefits of human capital circulation, many commentators argued that “the best thing underemployed professionals can do for their countries is to leave.”³¹

In short, whether or not Africa is “rising” depends on one’s index of measurement. For most Africans, the convergence effect did not translate into a higher standard of living. Behind sensational growth statistics, people continued to lack basic necessities. Jobs in the formal sector remained scarce throughout the region, accounting for as little as 10 percent of total nonagricultural employment.³² Farmers struggled with low productivity, environmental degradation, and climate change. In addition, much of the new wealth circulating through Africa was produced through precarious illegal activities ranging from the smuggling of goods and people over borders to the manufacture of counterfeit commodities, drugs, and firearms.³³ Furthermore, abuses of power—both public and private—were abetted rather than ameliorated

³¹ Mario Cervantes and Dominique Guellec, “Brain Drain: Old Myths, New Realities,” *OECD Observer* January 2002; Rubin Patterson, “U.S. Diasporas and Their Impacts on Homeland Technological and Socioeconomic Development: How Does Sub-Sahara Africa Compare?” *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology* 4, no. 1 (2005): 83–123.

³² Economic growth is generally assessed in terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the total goods produced and services provided within a year; it does not measure distribution; the “informal” economy, which accounts for the majority of economic activity in Africa; quality of life indicators such as health and education; or negative externalities such as pollution and climate change. See International Monetary Fund, *Sub-Saharan Africa: Restarting the Growth Engine* (Washington DC: IMF, 2017), 49. According to historian Morten Jerven, measurements of economic activity in Africa—be they estimates of growth or employment—have been skewed by observational bias, poor data collection, and policy pressures since before independence. See Morton Jerven, *Africa: Why Economists Get It Wrong* (London: Zed Books, 2015).

³³ Janet Roitman, *Fiscal Disobedience: An Anthropology of Economic Regulation in Central Africa* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); Brenda Chalfin, *Neoliberal Frontiers: An Ethnography of Sovereignty in West Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); and Kristin Peterson, *Speculative Markets: Drug Circuits and Derivative Life in Nigeria* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

by the expansion of extractive industries and military investments targeting the “war against terror.”³⁴ These dynamics undermined local economies, driving people elsewhere in search of safety, stability, and livelihood, which prompted initiatives to stem the tide by channeling yet more money into the military.

Whatever its motivations, migration became for Africans an increasingly widespread rite of passage, a means of both self-reliance and responsibility towards others. Enticed by proliferating signs of wealth and encouraged by others who have already left, underemployed working people from both urban and rural areas were joining the diaspora and contributing their earnings, however paltry, to the everyday needs of their families abroad.³⁵ The pressure to emigrate had extended beyond traditional candidates of the “brain drain,” educated elites for whom there is a demand abroad.³⁶ Accordingly, diaspora remittances were a crucial factor in the increase of personal spending that supported the emerging service sector in Africa.³⁷ Most of this

³⁴ James Ferguson, “Seeing Like an Oil Company,” *American Anthropologist* 107, no. 3 (2005): 377–82; Sharad Chari, “African Extraction, Indian Ocean Critique,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 114, no. 1 (2015): 83–100; Florian Trauner and Stepanie Deimel, “The Impact of EU Migration Policies on African Countries: The Case of Mali,” *International Migration* 51, no. 4 (2013): 20–32.

³⁵ On migration as a rite of passage, see Mamadou Diouf, “The Senegalese Murid Trade Diaspora and the Making of a Vernacular Cosmopolitanism,” *Public Culture* 12, no. 3 (2000): 679–702; Pascal Gaudette, “Jembe Hero: West African Drummers, Global Mobility and Cosmopolitanism as Status,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 39, no. 2 (2013): 295–310; Jill Alpes, “Bushfalling at All Cost: The Economy of Migratory Knowledge in Anglophone Cameroon,” *African Diaspora* 5 (2012): 90–115.

³⁶ The migration of highly-skilled professionals from relatively poorer to richer countries is often referred to as a “brain drain” of human capital that could otherwise be invested in developing countries of origin. This is a controversial issue within the migration scholarship, with some arguing that the cross-border remittance of contributions to family income constitute just such an investment within a global system of labor mobility. I discuss this issue in Chapters 1 and 5.

³⁷ The World Bank estimates that money from relatives abroad has increased tenfold since 2000, accounting for 14 percent of GDP in Senegal, 7 percent in Togo, and 6 percent in Mali. World Bank, *Migration and Remittances Factbook*, 3rd ed. (Washington DC: World Bank, 2016). The impact of diaspora remittances is likely to be much greater than reported here. These estimates represent only official transfers and do not capture contributions made through informal channels. In addition, such information is unreliable or unavailable for many of my informants’ countries of origin, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Republic of Congo, and Mauritania. See Claude Sumata, “Migradollars and Poverty Alleviation Strategy Issues in Congo (DRC),” *Review of African Political*

movement had been intra-regional and of a temporary or commercial nature, often within the context of free movement zones among neighboring countries.³⁸ Yet deaths in the Sahara and Mediterranean were tragic evidence that growing multitudes were risking their lives to find work in the Middle East and Europe.

As Fortress Europe has become increasingly resistant to the influx of “third country nationals,” aspiring emigrants turned their sights beyond the postcolonial metropole. Migration to the United States from Africa tripled between 1990 and 2010, although most Africans had a difficult time attaining visas.³⁹ Crossing the Atlantic is a costly affair, and legal permanent residency is only available to those who can demonstrate that they are unlikely to become a public charge. During the period in which I conducted my fieldwork, the majority of recent African immigrants to the United States had originated in the poorest, non-English speaking parts of West and Central Africa rather than the relatively more prosperous states of South Africa, Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya that dominated studies of the African “brain drain.”⁴⁰

Economy 29, nos. 93 and 94 (2002): 619–28; Amelia Duffy-Tumas, “Paying Back Comes First: Why Repayment Means More than Business in Rural Senegal,” *Gender and Development* 17, no. 2 (2009): 243–54.

³⁸ Aderanti Adepoju, “Reflections on International Migration and Development in sub-Saharan Africa,” *African Population Studies* 25, no. 2 (2011): 298–319.

³⁹ According to the Census Bureau, there were 1.7 million African immigrants living in the U.S. in 2015, up from 881,000 in 2000. They had the fastest growth rate of any other major immigrant group during that period, and currently account for 4.4 percent of the foreign-born population. Half of the 79,000 sub-Saharan immigrants to obtain legal permanent residency in 2015 obtained their status through family members. Most of the rest entered either as refugees (26 percent) or winners of the Diversity Immigrant Visa Program (17 percent), in both cases, the largest percentage from any region. Jie Zong and Jeanne Batalova, “Sub-Saharan African Immigrants in the United States,” *Migration Information Source Spotlight*, Migration Policy Institute, May 3, 2017. According to the World Bank, the United States ranked third in 2010, behind France and Saudi Arabia, among destination countries of African-born migrants leaving the continent. African populations are growing in every part of the world, with notable concentrations not only in Europe, the United States, and Canada, but also in the Middle East, China, and Australia. See Dilip Ratha et al., *Leveraging Migration for Africa: Remittances, Skills and Investments* (Washington DC: The World Bank, 2011).

⁴⁰ According to the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey, an estimated 44.6 percent of all migrants of African origin in the United States come from Western Africa, 35.7 percent are from Eastern

francophone immigrants earned an estimated \$5,000 less than the annual median annual income of anglophones, and a 165 percent increase in immigration arrests among that population between 2000 and 2015 suggests that many were undocumented. African migrants were likely to be of working age, and either Christian or Muslim, but demographic diversity discouraged further generalization. Across ethnic and national groups, within single families and throughout social networks, they were employed as skilled professionals, international traders, or semi-literate laborers. How did these people, without evident historical ties to the United States, confront the legal, logistical, and economic hurdles of migration? How did their accounting of the past and the future make sense of these experiences?

When I began my fieldwork in September 2010, the Great Recession had officially come to an end but was only beginning to make its mark on our lives. The official story of recovery was so out of sync with actual conditions that the Congressional Budget Office reduced its targets in 2014 to boost claims that the economy had returned to business-as-usual.⁴¹ Though low-wage service jobs were the first to bounce back, a decline in undocumented migration from Mexico indicated that arrival in the United States no longer implied ready employment.⁴² By 2017, the employment-to-population ratio for working-age men had fallen to its lowest level since 1948, and though there had been a widely reported drop in unemployment since that time, the estimated size of the workforce dropped as well, reflecting the fact that government statistics

Africa, 7.5 percent from Central Africa, and 5.8 percent from Southern Africa; 6.4 percent are unclassified.

⁴¹ Arne L. Kalleberg and Till M. von Wachter, "The U.S. Labor Market During and After the Great Recession: Continuities and Transformations," *Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 3, no. 3 (2017): 3.

⁴² Douglas S. Massey, "Immigration and the Great Recession," *Great Recession Brief* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2012).

do not capture “persons marginally attached to the labor force.”⁴³ A parallel trend of increasing self-employment may have reflected the fact that available jobs were less likely to offer the benefits or long-term security of the past.⁴⁴ In general, income had been stagnating for decades relative to the cost of living, evidence of what economists called a “secular decline” in the reallocation of human resources. This meant that employers were more likely to adopt new technologies and reorganize firms in response to hard times, undermining the capacity of workers to reenter the labor market once they have been laid off.⁴⁵ Against predictions that the U.S. economy would return to prior levels of employment and productivity, proponents of this view argued that these trends suggested “hysteresis,” a systemic pattern in which high levels of long-term, under- and unemployment had become the new normal for growing numbers of people.⁴⁶

These changes in the organization of work transformed the aspirations of nationals and migrants alike. Thirty years of global economic restructuring, automation, and public disinvestment had taken a toll on a public once relatively secure in its grasp of the future. During the decade following the crisis, job insecurity and declining buying power became permanent features of everyday life, even for skilled professionals. It became harder to find a job, buy a

⁴³ Kalleberg and von Wachter, *Continuities and Transformations*, 3.

⁴⁴ See Mary Dorinda Allard and Anne E. Polivka, “Measuring Labor Market Activity Today: Are the Words Work and Job Too Limiting for Surveys?” *Monthly Labor Review*, November 2018, 1–19; Regis Barnichon and Andrew Figura, “Declining Desire to Work and Downward Trends in Unemployment and Participation,” *NBER Macroeconomics Annual* 30 (2015): 449–94; and Emilio Congregado et al., “On the Substitutability Between Paid-Employment and Self-Employment: Evidence from the Period 1969-2014 in the United States,” *Sustainability* 11 (2019): 507.

⁴⁵ Economists use the term “secular” to designate market activities occurring over a long term; a “secular decline” generally refers to adverse trends that threaten a prevalent business model. See Steven J. Davis and John Haltiwanger, *Labor Market Fluidity and Economic Performance* (NBER Working Paper No. 20479, National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, MA, 2014).

⁴⁶ David Card and Alexandre Mas, “The Labor Market in The Aftermath of the Great Recession,” *Journal of Labor Economics* 34, no. S1 (2016): S1–6; Kalleberg and von Wachter, *Continuities and Transformations*, 5.

house, or pay for college, and for those who were already precarious, the effects were devastating.⁴⁷ As opportunities for wage labor diminished, a growing proportion of working-age adults either relied on others or exploited their knowledge, talents, and networks as entrepreneurs of the self. The optimism bias of recovery served as a self-fulfilling wish for confidence among not only business leaders and financiers, but also a workforce oriented towards personal investment and financial returns rather than institutional loyalty and the occupational brackets associated with class. As livelihoods deinstitutionalized, monetary skill became the means to mobility and the measure of status for traders and hustlers in all walks of life, from street peddlers and mortgage brokers to gangsters and hedge fund managers.

The long-term effects of the recession have been particularly acute for people of color. Black and immigrant families bore the brunt of the housing crisis and continue to lag far behind the national average in terms of both income and net assets.⁴⁸ Employers have been found to profile applicants with black and foreign-sounding names, and even well-educated migrants may find themselves blocked from professional jobs within segmented labor markets, especially when they don't speak English well.⁴⁹ Black Americans have long experienced discrimination in labor

⁴⁷ A number of powerful ethnographies document the impact of the Great Recession on economic restructuring in the United States. See, for example, Christine Walley, *Exit Zero: Family and Class in Postindustrial Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); and Carrie Lane, *A Company of One: Insecurity, Independence, and the New World of White-Collar Unemployment* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011).

⁴⁸ See Rakesh Kochhar and Richard Fry, *Wealth Inequality has Widened along Racial, Ethnic Lines Since End of Great Recession*, Pew Research Center, December 12, 2014; Eileen Patten, *Racial, Gender Wage Gaps Persist in U.S. Despite Some Progress*, Pew Research Center, July 1, 2016; and Lisa J. Dettling et al., "Recent Trends in Wealth-Holding by Race and Ethnicity: Evidence from the Survey of Consumer Finances," FEDS Notes (Washington: Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, 2017).

⁴⁹ Marianne Bertrand and Sendhil Mullainathan, "Are Emily and Greg More Employable than Lakisha and Jamal? A Field Experiment on Labor Market Discrimination," *American Economic Review* 94, no. 4 (2004): 991–1013; Philip Oreopoulos, "Why Do Skilled Immigrants Struggle in the Labor Market? A Field Experiment with Thirteen Thousand Resumes," *American Economic Journal* 3, no. 4 (2011): 148–71; and Sonia K. Kang et al., "Whitened Resumes: Race and Self-Presentation in the Labor Market," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2016): 469–502. On segmented labor markets, see Min Zhou,

and financial markets and are significantly more likely to be arrested and incarcerated than whites.⁵⁰ The implications of this sociological landscape for African immigrants is not obvious because it is difficult to assess their socioeconomic status in demographic terms.⁵¹ Census data indicate that sub-Saharan Africans have relatively high levels of education and participate in the labor force at a higher rate than overall immigrant and native-born populations.⁵² However, black immigrants are also more likely to experience poverty, and poor and undocumented households are less likely to be reflected in census statistics or surveys that rely on self-reporting.⁵³ Whatever their level of schooling, they are less likely to have obtained a permanent employment visa.⁵⁴ As newcomers to the labor market, immigrants are particularly exposed to recession conditions, experiencing lower pay, greater turnover, and poorer job quality over time.⁵⁵ In fact,

“Segmented Assimilation: Issues, Controversies, and Recent Research on the New Second Generation,” in *The Handbook of International Migration: The American Experience*, ed. Charles Hirschman et al. (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1999), 196–211; Hikmet J. Jamil et al., “Determinants of Employment among Well-Educated Refugees Before and After the 2007 U.S. Economic Recession,” *Letters in Health and Biological Sciences* 1, no. 1 (2016); and Matthew Hall and George Farkas, “Does Human Capital Raise Earnings for Immigrants in the Low-Skill Labor Market?” *Demography* 45, no. 3 (2008): 619–39.

⁵⁰ See Roland G. Fryer et al., “Racial Disparities in Job Finding and Offered Wages,” *The Journal of Law and Economics* 56, no. 3 (2013): 633–89; Taylor A. Begley and Amiyatosh Pernanandam, “Color and Credit: Race, Regulation, and the Quality of Financial Services,” (Poverty Solutions, Working Paper 3, March 2017); and Bruce Western and Beck Pettit, “Incarceration and Social Inequality,” *Daedalus* 139, no. 3 (2010): 8–19.

⁵¹ Irma T. Elo et al., “Africans in the American Labor Market,” *Demography* 52, no. 5 (2015): 1513–42.

⁵² According to the U.S. Census American Community Survey for 2015, 39 percent of sub-Saharan Africans living in the United States (ages 25 and over) had a bachelor’s degree or higher, compared to 29 percent of the total foreign-born population and 31 percent of the U.S.-born population. About 75 percent of sub-Saharan immigrants (ages 16 and over) were in the civilian labor force, compared to 66 percent and 62 percent of the overall foreign- and native-born populations, respectively. On the other hand, 19 percent lived in poverty, as compared with 17 percent of all immigrants and 14 percent of the U.S. born.

⁵³ Immigrant populations are generally undercounted for this reason. See Margo J. Anderson and Stephan Fienberg, *Who Counts? The Politics of Census Taking in Contemporary America* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2001).

⁵⁴ Kevin J. Thomas, “What Explains the Increasing Trend in African Emigration to the U.S.?” *International Migration Review* 45, no. 1 (2011): 3–28.

⁵⁵ Numerous studies indicate that young people and immigrants experienced lasting reductions in earnings and reduced expectations for future opportunities as a consequence of the Recession. For example, while Latino immigrants were one of the first groups to gain jobs following the recovery, they experienced

studies reveal a persistent “racial deficit” among black immigrants, with consistently low returns on education and high rates of unemployment, and child poverty rates that are among the worst in the country.⁵⁶ This is not only the case among those without legal means of entry who face the dangers of smuggling and the prospect of indefinite exile from their countries of origin. More privileged individuals migrating through standard procedures may also experience a decline in standard of living.

The Chicago area, where I had worked with migrants since the late 1980s, was an excellent site for observing how austerity influences everyday decision-making. The Chicago region created the fewest new jobs and lost more population than any other major metropolitan area between 2009 and 2017. During that period, the real estate market remained among the weakest in the country: only 7.6 percent of houses in the city and suburbs had recovered their pre-recession value, and industry specialists questioned whether large swaths of black and immigrant neighborhoods would ever recover.⁵⁷ For municipal government, loss of revenues

significant drops in wages. See Paola Giuliano and Antonio Spilimbergo, “Growing Up in a Recession.” *Review of Economic Studies* 81, no. 2 (2014): 787–817; Joseph G. Altonji et al., “Cashier or Consultant? Entry Labor Market Conditions, Field of Study, and Career Success,” *Journal of Labor Economics* 34, no. S1 (2016): S361–401; and Rakesh Kochhar et al., “After the Great Recession: Foreign Born Gain Jobs; Native Born Lose Jobs.” Pew Research Center, October 29, 2010.

⁵⁶ Kristin Butcher, “Black Immigrants in the United States: A Comparison with Native Blacks and Other Immigrants,” *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 47, no. 2 (1994): 265–84; F. N.A. Dodoo and B. K. Takyi, “Africans in the Diaspora: Black-White Earnings Difference among America’s Africans,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 25, no. 6 (2002): 913–41; Yanki K. Djamba and Sitawa R. Kimuna, “The Influence of Race on Employment Status and Earnings among African Immigrant Men in the United States,” *International Journal of Population Research* 1-11 (2011); and Kevin J. Thomas, “Familial Influences on Poverty Among Young Children in Black Immigrant, U.S.-born Black, and Nonblack Immigrant Families,” *Demography* 48 (2011): 437–60.

⁵⁷ In March 2016, Chicago had the weakest housing market in the United States, followed by Miami, which had recovered only 10.8 percent of real estate value. The nationwide average was 34.2 percent. See Dennis Rodkin, “Housing Recovery Lags Other Big Metro Areas,” *Crain’s Chicago Business*, May 3, 2017; Kim Janssen, “Seven Years after the Great Recession, Some Chicago Suburbs May Never Recover,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 26, 2016; and Derek Hyra and Jacob S. Rugh, “The US Great Recession: Exploring Its Association with Black Neighborhood Rise, Decline and Recovery,” *Urban Geography* 37, no. 5 (2016): 700–26.

exacerbated a long-term structural deficit; this combined with a withdrawal of funding from the state and resulted in severe cuts in spending for education, health care, and city services.⁵⁸ An historically segregated city, Chicago demonstrates one of the largest “racial wealth gaps” in the United States, with high unemployment, a lack of affordable housing, and a significant asset differential between white and minority households. Although the latter make up two-thirds of the city’s population, 65 percent are “liquid asset poor”—lacking savings to sustain more than three months at poverty level—compared with 28 percent of white households.⁵⁹

In contrast with these poverty trends, however, Chicago experienced a growth in asset wealth over the same period, suggesting new concentrations of investment. Despite a lax housing market, commercial real estate continued to expand.⁶⁰ The metropolitan area boasted 422 corporate facility investment projects in 2018, earning it first place for the sixth consecutive year in an annual ranking of corporate growth.⁶¹ Chicago was also one of the most profitable cities in the country for tech startups, drawing record quantities of venture capital and delivering high rates of return.⁶² The birthplace of futures and commodity trading, it is widely considered the capital of the derivatives industry, which remains one of the most powerful sectors of the global

⁵⁸ Rebecca Hendrick et al., “The Great Recession’s Impact on the City of Chicago’s Budget,” *Municipal Finance Journal* 32, no. 1 (2011): 33–69.

⁵⁹ Corporation for Enterprise Development, *The Racial Wealth Divide in Chicago* (Washington: CFED, January 2017). The Racial Wealth Divide Initiative, which is also supporting enterprise development programs in low-income neighborhoods, is a joint project of the Corporation for Enterprise Development and Georgetown University’s McCourt School of Public Policy, with funding by J. P. Morgan Chase, a leading global financial services firm, one of the largest banks in the United States, and a key protagonist in the liquidity crisis of 2008.

⁶⁰ See Rachel Weber, *From Boom to Bubble: How Finance Built the New Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

⁶¹ Adam Bruns, “Great Things Happen Here, HQ2 or Not,” *Site Selection Magazine* (March 2019): 84–101.

⁶² Jim Dallke, “Chicago Tech is on Pace for One of Its Best Years in VC Funding Ever,” *Chicago Inno*, June 16, 2017; John Pletz, “Best City for Monster Returns in Venture Capital? Chicago,” *Crains Chicago Business*, June 9, 2016.

finance economy.⁶³ Thus, Chicago manifested both the fruits of financialization and the blight of its creative destruction. Like Africa, whether or not Chicago was rising depended on one's index of measurement.

During my fieldwork, Africans continued to gamble on a new life in Chicago, even when the odds of success seemed small. In 2016, Chicago ranked tenth among metropolitan areas in its percentage of African foreign-born residents, quadrupling since 1990. This was a relatively recent migration compared with immigrants from other parts of the world and paralleled a decline in the city's African American population.⁶⁴ Like the categorical distinction between permanent and circular migration, it is a sociological truism that immigrants form enclave communities in order to facilitate adaptation, maximize access to resources, and achieve self-sufficiency.⁶⁵ Yet Chicago's francophone Africans were spread throughout the city and suburbs, living in both African American and primarily white neighborhoods. What motivated my informants' settlement decisions? What kinds of relationships did they rely on? How did they feel about the lives they had made there, and were they planning to stay?

The African immigrants living in American cities of financial bloom and human decline might feel that they "had gone from the frying pan into the fire," a repetition of the experience of the great African American migration to industrial cities like Chicago during the first half of the twentieth century. In his 1965 autobiography, *Manchild in the Promised Land*, Claude Brown

⁶³ Gregory Meyer, "Chicago Retains Role as Capital of Derivatives Industry," *Financial Times*, December 16, 2016.

⁶⁴ In 2016, Chicago and its suburbs lost 19,570 people, mostly African Americans, the largest drop of any metropolitan area in the country.

⁶⁵ Kenneth Wilson and Alejandro Portes, "Immigrant Enclaves: An Analysis of the Labor Market Experiences of Cubans in Miami," *American Journal of Sociology* 86, no. 2 (1980): 295–319; Roger Waldinger, "The Ethnic Enclave Debate Revisited," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 17, no. 3 (1993): 428–36.

describes the profound disenchantment experienced by African Americans who left the south for northern cities during the Great Migration.⁶⁶

I want to talk about the experiences of a misplaced generation, of a misplaced people in an extremely complex, confused society. This is a story of their searching, their dreams, their sorrows, their small and futile rebellions, and their endless battle to establish their own place in America's greatest metropolis—and in America itself.⁶⁷

Most of my informants had better housing than the Harlem slums of Brown's childhood, and segregation may be less overt. However, "sunup-to-sundown working hours" remained an enduring aspect of migrant life, which coupled with enduring racism and xenophobia, destabilized the conviction that they had arrived in a promised land.

Theoretical Constellation

"Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose." The more things change, the more they stay the same. Among my informants I heard this tired French aphorism often and always with irony. It usually followed a detailed report about how much things had changed: African countries are finally standing up to the West; the Chinese are taking over; young people no longer respect their elders. These remarks were then grounded by some constant: Europeans and Americans are hopelessly ignorant about Africa; government can't be trusted; people will take what they can get. The first statement might be accompanied by an anecdote illustrating the speaker's assertion that something had changed, whereas the second was rehearsed, like the proverb itself, as a fact of life so obvious that it barely deserved mentioning. Yet an ambiguity of emphasis remains. What has changed about what remains the same, and to what degree has what has changed

⁶⁶ An estimated 6 million African Americans migrated from the rural Southern United States to the urban Northeast, Midwest, and West between 1916 and 1970. See Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (New York: Vintage, 2011).

⁶⁷ Claude Brown, *Manchild in the Promised Land* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965), 7.

actually remained the same? I introduced this ambiguity in the previous section when I questioned the association of Africa's recent growth with previous stages of development, and also when I compared contemporary African migration from the Global South with the midcentury African American exodus from the American South to Chicago. These events have what Ludwig Wittgenstein called "family resemblances": particular common features that cannot be contained within a single unifying abstraction. Their differences, on the other hand, are content for the narrative form of explanation.

As business-as-usual faltered in the years following the Great Recession, my informants were preoccupied with signs of rupture. My readings in political economy suggested an explanation for the systemic shift we were experiencing. Beginning with the collapse of the gold standard and proceeding from stagflation to the stranglehold of structural adjustment, the financialization of advanced capitalism had gradually depleted African lives of the resources they needed to thrive. Now the subprime mortgage crisis had subjected homeowners in the United States to the same brutal calculus of liquidation and foreclosure. It was clear that the pigeons had come home to roost. The politics of austerity required of expanding capital markets had exacerbated the impact of rising wealth inequality, while automation and global competition obliterated what remained of the capital-labor compromise. Mollified by the autonomy of entrepreneurialism, the availability of credit, and a glut of inexpensive consumer goods from China, an expanding global middle-class sustained its ambitions by taking on debt to buy real estate, go to school, get health care, live the good life, and hope for the best. When that speculative bubble burst, populists took power by inciting xenophobia, and states reacted to their loss of legitimacy by militarizing their immigration regimes. My informants were at the center of this unprecedented conflation of global trends.

Compelling as it was, my account of the crisis drew blank stares from most of my informants. It's not that they were uninterested in the sociohistorical dynamics that had brought them to the present moment; indeed, their inquiries and interpretations motivated my plunge into multi-disciplinary scholarship. I had emerged from that thicket of competing frameworks with a map on which I could plot the spatiotemporal coordinates of my fieldwork. But my informants were seeking another kind of knowledge. They wanted to translate their experience into a resource for action. They did not find that my expertise enhanced their understanding of a predicament they already knew only too well. However, it *was* a valuable tool for diagnosing complex problems and intervening with lawyers and bureaucrats. In her ethnography of Chinese medicine, Judith Farquhar articulates a relationship between biomedical expertise and "knowing practice," a social form in which ideas and behaviors merge as "signifying and world-altering activity."⁶⁸ Farquhar is interested in the work that knowledge does in experience—how knowing creates and recreates what is known. My knowledge of her work contributed to my ethnographic practice as I sought to preserve analytical distinctions that would not stay still in an ever-changing field of observation. "To call the relationship of knowledge and practice a dialectic under such circumstances is an understatement," Farquhar concludes. "Rather, it begins to appear the height of arbitrariness to separate them as two dimensions (or 'moments') at all."⁶⁹

Over six years of fieldwork, my attention gradually shifted from evidence that confirmed my analysis to patterns of analysis and action among my informants. Instead of discerning real content from fiction in their discourse, for example, I noticed that storytelling that compared the present with the past and Africa from America was a practice that did not change. My informants

⁶⁸ Judith Farquhar, *Knowing Practice* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), 4.

⁶⁹ Farquhar, 226.

complained about grasping relatives while they were sending them money; they expressed bewilderment even as they dispensed practical advice. “Only Allah knows what will happen,” said Amina when she finished her college degree after a twenty-year hiatus. A Methodist minister from Congo told me that people kept praying when they had doubts in God for the same reason they kept working when they didn’t get paid. “It’s what you do, not what you believe, that matters.” Pastor Nkara may have been speaking of himself. His former assistant minister had recently launched a new evangelical church, taking a significant proportion of the congregation with him. “These are hard times, and they want salvation without spirituality,” Pastor Nkara lamented in an oblique reference to the prosperity gospel. “But I believe that if we hold the course, they will come back.”

Writing this ethnography has involved a similar leap of faith. My scattered series of ethnographic observations do not congeal into coherent knowledge about a world we share. My attempt to grasp the political economy of our times produces a narrative that frames my ethnographic observations as a temporal duration that is already past, a segment of the history of postwar capitalism. It is a story that assumes an external standpoint from which the global system can be understood as a moment of capital, an inexorable force driving an accelerating process of planetary transformation. Yet my efforts to explain what I have seen in the field—and to express those explanations to my informants—are inadequate to our shared experiences of work, play, and bureaucracy. Immersed in the flow of everyday life, I cannot take a position from which to distinguish causes from effects with any certainty. I may assume I know what is going on based on my knowledge: the accumulated residue of training, reading, and past experience. Yet it is only after the fact that I recount what has happened in the distinctive terms that make it a story worth telling. I say “after the fact” because it is the narrative frame that

converts my fieldnotes into data, a collection of facts that can be combined and classified in ways that support my assertions. And what of those assertions? My argument is the speculative decision that bridges these two dimensions of analysis and experience. It is the performance of intention that fails, inevitably yet creatively, to grasp a world in motion.

In this sense, participant observation—like emigration—is an inherently speculative enterprise. The Oxford English Dictionary provides two definitions for “speculation”: 1) the forming of a theory without firm evidence; and 2) investment in stocks, property, or other ventures in the hope of gain but with the risk of loss. With respect to the first meaning of the word, data that cannot be alienated from its mode of production lacks the firm objectivity of evidential ground. From a standpoint of epistemological certainty, the guess negates the truth of the fact just as the migrant threatens the identity of the nation. Yet the truth value of the fact is no more rational than Pastor Nkara’s faith that his stray congregants will return. That some facts are better than others—in the laboratory, the courtroom, or the court of public opinion—is a comparative judgement, not an absolute one.⁷⁰ Only by bracketing the fundamental indeterminacy of knowledge does identity assume the mantle of sovereignty, marking the migrant as potential terrorist and the ethnographer as potential fraud. Accepting the ambivalence—literally the “two-sidedness”—of representational thought, on the other hand, renders any evidential claim speculative insofar as it is simultaneously made and found: its apprehension as an object from within its network of associations is retroactively posited as a determination of intrinsic value. In this respect, the essential indeterminacy of ethnographic knowledge is

⁷⁰ Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Mary Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); and Bill Maurer, “Visions of Fact: Languages of Evidence: History, Memory, and the Trauma of Legal Research,” *Law and Social Inquiry* 26, no. 4 (2001): 893–909.

analogous to the second definition of the word “speculation,” the risk of loss associated with financial investment.

I argue that speculation is the dominant form of action and self-understanding within financialized capitalism, not only for banks, investment companies, hedge funds, and private equity firms, but for corporations-as-persons and persons-as-corporations, as well as the governments that authorize them. As affirmed by the Supreme Court’s 2010 decision in *Citizen United*, corporations enjoy the status of legal personhood in the United States, a convention which allows them to exert a disproportionate influence on campaign finance and capital markets. Conversely, personhood may also take the form of corporate “dividuals” constituted by partible elements that are shared with others.⁷¹ Introduced by anthropologists to describe non-bourgeois sociality, the term “dividuality” was taken up by Gilles Deleuze to capture post-bourgeois dissolution of personal identity into a cluster of data within a network. According to Deleuze, “We are in a generalized crisis in relation to all the environments of enclosure.”⁷² Systems are open, containing porous boundaries that control the flow of information. Deleuze uses the metaphor of surfing to capture the intuitive management of risk that such an environment requires. I prefer the financial term “arbitrage” because it captures how acting on one’s knowledge changes the environment by participating in it. My informants call this knowing practice *debrouillardise*, or “making do.”

In the discussion that follows, I elaborate on my thesis that under the everyday crisis conditions of a global economy dominated by finance, African migrants arbitrage spacetime as a

⁷¹ McKim Marriott, “Interpreting Indian Society: A Monistic Alternative to Dumont’s Dualism,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 36, no. 1 (1976): 189–95; Marilyn Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988); and Arjun Appadurai, *Banking on Words: The Failure of Language in the Age of Derivative Finance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

⁷² Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” *October* 59 (Winter, 1992), 3–7.

knowing practice that derives value from uncertainty. I do this by examining its underlying claims: 1) financialization manifests the contradictions of late capitalism; 2) these manifestations appear as the conversion of representations into assets; and 3) migration is a “knowing practice” of arbitrage that is ethical by virtue of its ambivalence. In reviewing the literature that informed my research, I also intend through my writing to perform a process of thinking that begins with a dialectical meta-narrative of explanation, considers how explanations themselves have efficacy, and then confronts itself as a practice with ambivalent meaning and effects. My ambivalence suggests that this intention may fail.

Moments of Capital

Why does it seem necessary to write a history of the present? “Long before I read Nietzsche’s *Untimely Meditations*,” reflected Michel-Rolph Trouillot, “I knew intuitively that people can suffer from historical overdose, complaisant hostages of the pasts they create.”⁷³ Both Nietzsche and Trouillot sought to immunize their readers with a different kind of history, one that would fill its silences and heal its wounds.⁷⁴ They hoped that their untimely meditations on the past would expose the prospect on the horizon as the void of the present in which anything can happen. Unequal wealth and hierarchies of power provoke the desire for a better way of being together in the world. This desire for justice takes the form of political projects that are shown to be unjust, leading to calls for new explanations and better solutions. History is always

⁷³ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. (Boston: Beacon, 1995), xxii.

⁷⁴ “To determine ... the boundary at which the past has to be forgotten if it is not to become the gravedigger of the present, one would have to know exactly how great the plastic power of a man, a people, a culture is: I mean by plastic power the capacity to develop out of oneself in one's own way, to transform and incorporate into oneself what is past and foreign, to heal wounds, to replace what has been lost, to recreate broken moulds.” Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 62.

about the future, as Marx pointed out, because of its farcical tendency to repeat itself in ever-changing ways. This repetition has the uncanny familiarity of *déjà-vu*. We have been here before, and it did not go well. Surely we can do better? And yet nothing is ever the same, which is where the story lies. We never expected so many jobs to disappear so suddenly, or the value of homes and businesses to deteriorate so fast. We have never seen a president like Donald Trump. We never thought the weather could change. The hegemonic meta-narrative of globalization, which was transforming the world in America's image, has fractured before our eyes.

There are many questions that could be asked about the time during which I conducted my fieldwork, giving rise to an infinite number of stories. The internet is full of competing histories and counter-histories that draw continuities among certain details to generalize about our common existence. While debates over the validity of these representations center on the accuracy of facts, the difference may lie in the theory of causality that invests those facts with meaning. Many people blamed the recession on the selfishness of human nature, the Obama administration, or the personal irresponsibility of the poor. I believe that financial crisis is intrinsic to capitalism. Based on this core belief, I interpret signs of rupture in the fabric of my life and the lives of my informants as evidence of a transformation in global dynamics of capital accumulation. Capitalism is a theory of causality that frames my untimely meditations on our new normal of uncertainty. Yet my attempt to represent a coherent world in support of my thesis fixes my position, not my object of investigation. In the field, "capital" was both there and not there: circulating, mutating, and going to waste. It materialized when it counted: the moment a debt was paid, a job offered, or an immigration petition approved. Incorporating these moments into an account of capitalism, however, required abstract thinking at a distance. The kernel of reality is not in the content of this explanation, which might be different, but in the temporal

movement between experience and analysis that has produced this ethnography as the symptom of an event.

This is equivalent to saying that the system of relations called capitalism is real by virtue of the value of time that is transformed into capital. At the center of Marx's critique of political economy is the question of how human activity creates something out of nothing: a surplus that can be leveraged as a form of social wealth and power. In *Capital*, he introduces this value in the form of commodities, which, like facts, are discovered as objects in the world by the people who have made them. These social objects are described in religious terms as "fetishes," things that are animated by the alienated spirit of their creators. We worship the products of our collective activity in the temple of the marketplace where their value is realized as price. Exchange converts the spirit of the commodity into the form of money, a general equivalent that translates the infinite qualities of things into a finite quantity of wealth. This money is in turn invested into the production process, where it performs the greatest magic trick of all: replicating itself by financing the production of more commodities. For Marx, these moments of capital circulate around their origin in the "hidden abode" of the factory floor, where an interval of labor time is stolen from workers in order to make a profit. Thus, it is the measurement of time that distinguishes capitalism from earlier modes of production. When time becomes money, the use-value of work is rationalized in the form of a wage, which makes the systematic extraction of surplus value possible. The reality of capitalism is the value of time.

Time is a source of value insofar as it takes form within a dynamic system that transforms life through its own practical activity. Marx works out this reasoning in the *Grundrisse*, which applies the method of Hegel's *Science of Logic* to the problems of classical political economy.

This manuscript begins by describing the process whereby the producers of every society presuppose the nature of the world they have created:

In the succession of the economic categories, as in any other historical, social science, it must not be forgotten that their subject—here, modern bourgeois society—is always what is given, in the head as well as in reality, and that these categories therefore express the forms of being, the characteristics of existence, and often only individual sides of this specific society, this subject, and that therefore this society by no means begins only at the point where one can speak of it as such; this holds for science as well.⁷⁵

Although the movement of time is constantly changing the objects of human consciousness, that consciousness locks them into categories of understanding that determine particular relations between the thinking subject and its objects as universal. Note that this subject is collective: modern bourgeois society has created the world that created it, and it has done this, Marx argues, in the form of capital. Like Newtonian gravity, capital is a force that is both natural and social insofar as it is an active concept that reflects “the characteristics of existence.” Just as gravity causes the natural world to hang together, so capital generates the conditions of material life and thought under capitalism. “The different kinds of capital, which, in economics, fall out of the sky, here appear as so many precipitates of the movements arising out of the nature of capital itself, or rather of this movement itself in its different moments.”⁷⁶

For Hegel, this movement is a contradiction that spirals continuously from the experience of a particular reality to its conceptual negation. This conceptualization is posited as knowledge that is negated a second time, when it is presupposed as the objective ground for perception. This

⁷⁵ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin Classics, 1973), 106. The arguments explicitly developed in *Grundrisse* would be applied in *Capital* as “immanent critique” from the standpoint of capital, much as Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* presents from the standpoint of spirit what the *Science of Logic* directly explains. See the essays in Marcello Musto, ed., *Karl Marx’s Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy 150 Years Later* (London: Routledge, 2008).

⁷⁶ Marx, *Grundrisse*, 679.

process of apprehension, negation, and positing—a double negation—repeats infinitely. Yet these iterations are never identical because the passage of time changes the particular configuration of sense data that is taken up as meaningful. The “synthesis” of knowledge is never complete: understanding must filter out the noise, repressing aspects of reality that will return as disorder, waste, trauma.

Likewise, capital circulates in its simple undifferentiated particularity as the potential for wealth, is then negated when it is fixed as a form of capital, and is finally negated a second time as exchange-value.⁷⁷ The products of labor power are merely potential use-values until their value is realized as a price in the form of money. That value is retroactively posited as always having existed within the fixed capital of the commodity. In the same way, money is merely potential until its value is realized, either by purchasing consumer goods or by investing in producer goods such as machines, a form of fixed capital that expands the means of production. Through this third step, capital—the social subject of this process—both realizes and reproduces itself: it determines its own value by virtue of its contractual claim on profits, and it expands by virtue of its own circulation. It is in the form of investment that capital not only ensures the continuation of the process, but also motivates its acceleration through technologies that produce more at less cost. Moishe Postone describes this “treadmill effect” as a dialectic between labor and time in which increased productivity forces ever more value from the generalized hour of labor time that constitutes the wage.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Marx, 618–23.

⁷⁸ Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor and Social Domination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 286–306. This discussion has also benefitted from a close reading of Hiroshi Uchida, *Marx’s Grundrisse and Hegel’s Logic* (London: Routledge, 1988).

It bears repeating that according to this model, capitalism is not a mechanical process driven by a teleological function, but a dialectical one that produces its own causes. An enterprise that exists to accumulate capital does not exist in order to produce goods for consumption, whatever commodities it may sell. This is why the same dynamic developing the forces of production also constrains them, leading to crises in social reproduction.⁷⁹ When Marx was writing *Capital*, the deterioration of feudal social arrangements, which had been organized around gift obligations as compensation for land rent, liberated “doubly free” workers with nothing to sell but their time and energy. The abundant supply of labor made it cheap; workers earned barely enough to reproduce themselves, much less buy what they produced. This situation radicalized politics wherever industrialization spread, forcing concessions from capitalists that lay the ground for the emergence of a middle class. At the same time, the wages with which workers sought to meet their needs circulated an abundant supply of cash, fueling commercial expansion. Most importantly, all of this economic activity generated an abundant supply of capital: profits exceeding costs that required outlets for investment. Marx predicted that as the circuits of capital encompassed the planet, capitalists would try to maintain rates of profit by replacing living labor with machines, creating an idle surplus population irrelevant to capital accumulation.⁸⁰ He also anticipated that an expanding financial sector would sever capital

⁷⁹ This was true, to some degree, for Adam Smith as well, insofar as the propensity for “the employers of stock” to narrow competition undermined the happy accident of profit motive and generalized prosperity on which the “wealth of nations” is based. “The plans and projects of the employers of stock regulate and direct all the most important operations of labour, and profit is the end proposed by all those plans and projects.” Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. Edward Cannan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 284.

⁸⁰ “The real barrier of capitalist production is capital itself. It is that capital and its self-expansion appear as the starting and the closing point, the motive and the purpose of production; that production is only production for capital and not vice versa, the means of production are not mere means for a constant expansion of the living process of the society of producers.” Karl Marx (1981), *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume III*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Penguin, 1981), 358–59.

accumulation from state control as effectively as it had already alienated wage-laborers from production.⁸¹ However widespread the development of the world's resources, the immanent contradiction of capitalism would ensure that a growing proportion of the world's wealth reflected a diminishing quantum of human activity.

What do today's financial, political, and ecological crises indicate about what has changed and what stays the same? Most Marxist theorists maintain that surplus value can only be generated by human labor. "As the accumulation of value slows down," writes Postone, "the search for wealth becomes perversely reflexive, like an autoimmune disease—it begins to feed on the substance of society and nature."⁸² David Harvey treats financial markets as a means of accumulation by dispossession driven by a predatory ruling class.⁸³ For Robert Brenner, turbulent credit markets are symptomatic of a global decline in productivity.⁸⁴ Taking Marx's designation of "fictitious capital" at face value, they are concerned that the real economy of material production and consumption has been obscured by the fetishization of money as an object with agency.⁸⁵ Yet Marx characterized capital as a force that is its own cause. As the subject of capitalism, capital is both the energy and the embodiment of human intention. It acquires momentum as it reproduces itself, and it is also a form of appearance that structures our lives. To treat financialization as a feature of neoliberalism, a variation on the ideology of market equilibrium, does not capture the two-sidedness of the French aphorism: things that stay the same also change.

⁸¹ "In stock companies the function is divorced from capital ownership, hence also labor is entirely divorced from ownership of means of production and surplus-labor." Marx, *Grundrisse*, 315–16.

⁸² Moishe Postone, "The Current Crisis and the Anachronism of Value," *Continental Thought and Theory* 1, no. 4 (2017): 52.

⁸³ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007), 116.

⁸⁴ Robert Brenner, *The Economics of Global Turbulence* (London: Verso, 2006).

⁸⁵ See Marx, *Grundrisse*, 525–42.

That finance is fictitious does not mean it is not real. It is what Alfred Sohn-Rethel called a “real abstraction”: objectivity that is produced through spatiotemporal activity.⁸⁶ Sohn-Rethel was most interested not in the production of commodities but in the activity of monetary exchange, a quantitative comparability of price that is commensurate with qualitative use-values. Following Marx, he argued that trade relations in the ancient world gave rise to the general equivalent of the money-form as an abstract presupposition, which was also a condition of possibility for rational thought. These concerns were not strictly academic. *Intellectual and Manual Labor* was published in 1978, just as stagflation was dragging down postwar production, and technocracies on both sides of the Cold War were stockpiling weapons of mass destruction.⁸⁷ It was from the standpoint of the future, as anticipated in the present, that Sohn-Rethel sought to grasp the social emergence of abstract, alienated thought as a precondition for the abstract, alienated labor of mass manufacturing.⁸⁸ Today, scholars concerned with finance after the 2008 Recession are reframing industrial capitalism within a *long durée* of money and debt.⁸⁹ Transhistorical with respect to the capitalist mode of production, such an approach is nonetheless consistent with a materialist conception of history as a form of social self-understanding that is itself located in time. “Timebound truth is an existential, not a cognitive, ideal,” Sohn-Rethel maintained. “It is a truth of being, not of thinking.”⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1978), 20.

⁸⁷ Sohn-Rethel, 181. “The science and the technology rule over nature like ‘an occupying army in enemy country’, whereas in socialism we must aim to establish ‘an alliance of society with nature.’” Here Sohn-Rethel is quoting Swiss German philosopher Ernst Bloch’s *The Principle of Hope*, a meditation on Christian and Marxist utopianism written while in exile during World War II.

⁸⁸ Sohn-Rethel, 173

⁸⁹ See Robert Meister, *Justice Is an Option* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021); Jonathan Levy, *Ages of American Capitalism* (New York: Random House, 2021); Michel Aglietta, *Money: 5,000 Years of Debt and Power* (London: Verso, 2018); André Orléan, *The Empire of Value: A New Foundation for Economics*, trans. M.B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014).

⁹⁰ Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 199–204.

A rereading of the first volume of *Capital* from the standpoint of finance indicates that Marx was actually preoccupied with credit. The underpaid poor make do thanks to informal debts, and unions are “insurance societies formed by the workers themselves.”⁹¹ Workers also lend just as capitalists must borrow. “Everywhere the worker allows credit to the capitalist,” advancing two weeks of labor-power before the first wages.⁹² Indeed, the only distinction between the subject that produces capital and the subject that owns it is the possession of property, in excess of labor-power, that can be used as collateral to contract loans. “The nature of capital remains the same in its developed as it is in its undeveloped forms,” Marx writes in a footnote that compares the long-term debt of indentured servitude to slavery.⁹³ The venture capital that financed the first factory had accumulated through the proto-capitalist institutions of mercantilism, most notably joint-stock companies and chattel slavery. “The colonial system, with its maritime trade and its commercial wars, served as a forcing-house for the credit system,” he notes. “The national debt, i.e., the alienation of the state—whether that state is despotic, constitutional or republican—marked the capitalist era with its stamp.” This passage suggests that contrary to the widespread assertion that Marx lacked a theory of the state, he conceived of it in financial terms.⁹⁴ Modern governments guarantee a secure currency on which capital markets thrive: “The national debt has given rise to joint-stock companies, to dealings in negotiable

⁹¹ Karl Marx, *Capital, A Critique of Political Economy, Vol I*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1976), 827, 1070.

⁹² Marx, 277.

⁹³ Marx, 400, FN 19.

⁹⁴ See Philip Abrams, “Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* I, no. 1 (1988): 58–89. Fernando Coronil developed the implications of Marx’s financial theory of the state in his historical ethnography of Venezuela as a “petrostate” that cultivated political independence by leveraging oil rents. *The Magical State: Nature, Money and Modernity in Venezuela* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

effects of all kinds, and to speculation: in a word, it has given rise to stock-exchange gambling and the modern bankocracy.”⁹⁵

Today, speculation has replaced consumption as the primary means for the realization of value. In a shopping mall, the value of a commodity is derived from a temporal surplus that was extracted from labor in the past. At the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, the value of an asset is derived from a temporal surplus that is harvested from volatility in the future. In either case, value is a function of indeterminacy, what Marx described as a *salto mortale* “from the body of the commodity into the body of the gold.”⁹⁶ Capital makes this leap whenever it exploits the contingency of necessity and the material demands of embodied workers, as well as the necessity of contingency, by arbitraging the turbulence that it creates. The “societal level repetition compulsion” of periodic economic crisis expresses the dialectic between fixed and circulating capital, property, and liquidity.⁹⁷ Regulated economies of the mid-twentieth century attempted to counter the “liquidity preference” of shareholders with policies that favored capital investment in the material infrastructure of social reproduction. For decades, a capital-labor compromise facilitated the unprecedented distribution of wealth in the industrialized societies of the Global North.⁹⁸ Since that time, however, the quantity of capital in circulation has exceeded the rate of

⁹⁵ Marx, *Capital*, 919.

⁹⁶ Marx, 200. In a footnote, Marx attaches this remark to a quotation by Heraclitus that stresses the flux of transformation: “All things exchange for fire, and fire for all things, just as gold for goods and goods for gold.” The Italian phrase *salto mortale*—a death-defying leap—references a debate between Friedrich Jacobi and Immanuel Kant over the gap between concept and experience. Jacobi’s Spinozist commitment to the immanence of truth as a “leap of faith” would later be taken up by existentialists and phenomenologists such as Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, William James, and Gilles Deleuze. On the implications of this idea in Marx’s thought, see Kojin Karatani, *Transcritique: On Kant and Marx*, trans. Sabu Kohso (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

⁹⁷ William H. Sewell, Jr, “Economic Crises and the Shape of Modern History,” *Public Culture* 24, no. 2 (2012): 303–27.

⁹⁸ “Of the maxims of orthodox finance none, surely, is more anti-social than the fetish of liquidity, the doctrine that it is a positive virtue on the part of investment institutions to concentrate their resources upon the holding of ‘liquid’ securities. It forgets that there is no such thing as liquidity of investment for

growth even in China, which has become the world's leading manufacturer.⁹⁹ Low interest rates prioritize an abundant supply of credit over the rate of return on investments, an indication that economic policy is more concerned with currency stability than commodity production.

Approaching African migration as a form of arbitrage reframes the familiar story of underdevelopment and brain drain as an artifact of postwar industrial expansion. According to our current “timebound truth,” Africa was never peripheral to the emergence of capitalism but a condition of its possibility: a key asset yielding slave labor, raw materials, and commercial real estate—first for venture capitalists and then colonizing powers that still protect their interests in the region. The historical fetish originated as a point of parity between mutually unintelligible regimes of value: sixteenth century European traders and their West African counterparts who were equally experienced at leveraging marginal gains at thresholds of difference.¹⁰⁰ As argued by William Pietz, this magical object performed the leap between contingency and necessity by serving as a factual cause of contractual liability. Later developments in commercial insurance, torts, and colonial administration replaced the “material consideration” with a legal forensics of capital that secured the conversion of property into assets.¹⁰¹ Today, emerging markets represent the cutting edge of financialization, with experts promoting government-insured real estate and bond markets as the key to global integration.¹⁰² As one Kenyan official puts it, the coordination

the community as a whole.” John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money* (London: Harcourt, 1964), 155.

⁹⁹ See Magali Marx, *Why Have Interest Rates Fallen Far Below the Return on Capital?* (Working Paper 794, Bank for International Settlements, Basel, Switzerland, 2019).

¹⁰⁰ William Pietz, “The Problem of the Fetish, Part 1,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 9 (1985): 5–17; Jane Guyer, *Marginal Gains: Monetary Transactions in Atlantic Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

¹⁰¹ William Pietz, “Material Considerations: On the Historical Forensics of Contract,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 19, nos. 5 and 6 (2002): 35–50. Michael Ralph applies Pietz’s concept to Senegalese political formation in *Forensics of Capital* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

¹⁰² A particularly influential report making this argument to potential investors was McKinsey and Company’s *Deepening Capital Markets in Emerging Economies* (2017). For a more technical approach,

of regional standards will pave the way for the emergence of Africa “as an asset class through allowing issuers and investors to freely operate across all members states, unlocking ‘scale’ markets.”¹⁰³ What is notable about his remark is not the globalization ideal of a universal market but the role of government as its guarantor. Contrary to the neoliberal axiom of free enterprise with minimal government intervention, asset liquidity must be secured by the state as a lender of last resort, which must in turn protect the sovereignty of its currency by means of law enforcement.¹⁰⁴

It is this “double securitization” of financialized governance that accounts for the politics of austerity in a rich world. As Deleuze anticipated, globalization has been accompanied by enhanced territorial control and forms of surveillance that “dividuate” persons based on the likelihood of their assets to appreciate in the future. Why should wealthy countries prioritize military spending over public welfare? What seems paradoxical to the citizens of the Global North is old news in the South. “Africa has been within the West’s money economy for at least five centuries, deeply shaped by its demands and its indifferences, by force and neglect, by domination in some domains and refusal to engage in others, by open flows of currency and closed doors to convertibility.”¹⁰⁵ Contemporary emigration is both a manifestation of this pattern and a collective response to the forensics of capital that for decades has drained the African public sector in order to service sovereign debt. As debt-equity ratios have increased in even the wealthiest countries, creditor governments have also curbed spending to keep interest

see Bank for International Settlements, *Financial Market Development, Monetary Policy and Financial Stability in Emerging Market Economies*. (BIS Papers, No. 113. Basel, Switzerland, December, 2020).

¹⁰³ Alison Buckholtz, *Spotlight: Capital Markets in Africa*, International Finance Corporation, World Bank Group (February 2020).

¹⁰⁴ Perry Mehrling, “Financialization and its Discontents,” *Finance and Society* 3, no. 1 (2017): 1–10.

¹⁰⁵ Guyer, *Marginal Gains*, 4.

rates low and stand ready for financial bailouts. Tax dollars are dedicated to assets, such as military security or technological research and development, that seek to prevent global economic collapse by sustaining investor confidence and fostering resilience. Sensitivity of price to expectation demands transparency, the governance of appearance. As one such appearance, migrants are both a source of positive volatility and its negation, the universal form of a threat that cannot be known.

Real Facts

“We are, indeed, all of us suspects,” wrote Haitian-American novelist Edwidge Dandicat. “However, as immigrants, we live with the double threat of being both possible victims and suspects, often with deadly consequences.” In her forward to a collection of testimonies by immigrants after the events of September 11, Dandicat recounts the story of her uncle’s death by neglect in a Florida detention camp after fleeing the disorder surrounding a United Nations “peacekeeping” operation that had antagonized gangs in his Port-au-Prince neighborhood.¹⁰⁶ Hannah Arendt famously called stateless persons “the most symptomatic group in contemporary politics” because, lacking the protection of a political community, they are stranded in a state of “mere existence.” For Arendt, “This whole sphere of the merely given, relegated to private life in civilized society, is a permanent threat to the public sphere, because the public sphere is as consistently based on the law of equality as the private sphere is based on the law of universal difference and differentiation.”¹⁰⁷ Forty years later, Giorgio Agamben was less sanguine about

¹⁰⁶ Edwidge Dandicat, “Forward,” in *We Are All Suspects Now*, ed. Tram Nguyen (Boston, Beacon Press, 2005).

¹⁰⁷ Hannah Arendt, “The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man,” in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1951), 301.

the equality of the liberal state when he argued that even citizens are denizens, as singular in their embodied difference as refugees.¹⁰⁸

From a human rights perspective, Agamben's generalizing claim is inaccurate and even insensitive. Noncitizens do not enjoy the full legal protections of citizens and are often scapegoated during economic downturns.¹⁰⁹ Yet Agamben is not dismissing the categorical risks confronting irregular migrants; he is bringing attention to the limits of rights as such. Following Karl Schmitt and Walter Benjamin, he argues that the rule of law draws its authority from the absolute power that defines sovereignty.¹¹⁰ However egalitarian its constitution, every government ultimately preserves order through the discretionary judgements of the executive and the police. Even the judiciary, charged with interpreting the letter of the law, makes a *salto mortale* every time it applies a general rule to a particular case in which there are always mitigating circumstances.¹¹¹

Migrants expose this hidden limit of civil rights because their legal recognition is explicitly a matter of state discretion. Their presence and participation in a social order disrupts the coincidence of personhood and citizenship that is assumed in the statement "we, the people," a speech act that instantiates the fiction of the nation-state. The nonidentity of presence and belonging is conveniently overlooked in most countries whenever employers need an abundant

¹⁰⁸ Giorgio Agamben, "Beyond Human Rights," in *Means without End: Notes on Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 15–28.

¹⁰⁹ See Stephen Castles et al., *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*, 5th ed. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014).

¹¹⁰ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998); Karl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, trans. George Schwab (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1985); and Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," in *Reflections*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken, 1978), 277–300.

¹¹¹ David Gray Carlson, "The Traumatic Dimension in Law," *Cardozo Law Review* 24 (2003): 2287–2329.

supply of cheap labor. However, events such as 9/11 or the 2008 Recession reveal the “negative theology” of absolute sovereignty as a state of emergency, in which the suspect is marginalized, victimized, and deported to preserve the unity of the nation—or so Arendt would have it.

Agamben’s point, however, is that the exception proves the rule. The indeterminacy that always exists between general law and particular case means that anyone is potentially *homo sacer*, without recognition and bearing only the sacred truth of the body.¹¹² When the scapegoat is “killed but not sacrificed,” metaphorically or literally, it is not only international human rights that fail the victim but the civil rights of citizenship as well.

This political aporia, which appears during crises, indicates that financialization, which thrives on crisis, cannot be considered a new form of liberalism. On the contrary, financialization points beyond the ideologies of capitalist productivity and human rights, collapsing politics and economics within a generalized logic of risk management. Today, states do not protect the rights of their citizens in the interests of equality, as Arendt assumed, so much as they cultivate resilience under conditions of assumed inequality. In the United States, privatized public services—which double as assets for financial engineering—operate according to a business model that transfers the risks of everyday life onto households. Concurrently, casual work has its ultimate expression in the form of the gig economy, in which low-skilled workers contract with companies as though they were small businesses of one. These consumer-citizens are encouraged to insure themselves—and compensate for inadequate income—through debt.

¹¹² See Didier Fassin and Estelle D'Halluin, “The Truth from the Body: Medical Certificates as Ultimate Evidence for Asylum Seekers,” *American Anthropologist* 107, no. 4 (2005): 597–608.

“Always owe somebody something,” advised Rabelais’s character Panurge, “then he will be forever praying God to grant you a good, long and blessed life.”¹¹³ This bit of ironic humor from the mid-sixteenth century resonates today with the political economy of life and death that Michel Foucault called “biopolitics.”¹¹⁴

Biopolitical governance decides the difference between victim and suspect based on the “real facts” that circulate like currency between bureaucracies and financial markets. Historically, the technology of statistics has been instrumental to the representation of society in its generality. Ian Hacking has shown how statistical laws describing patterns of observation became objective laws of nature that could be observed through the collection of facts.¹¹⁵ The disavowal of divine knowledge motivated this subtle cognitive shift between two meanings of probability: a subjective degree of certainty, on one hand, and a statistical frequency, on the other. A mode of seeing aggregates became an aggregate mode of being, essentially creating society itself as a social fact. Furthermore, the convention of bracketing uncertainty converted the “margin of error” into its own positive quantity that pathologized individuals who deviated from the mean within a population. Real statistical facts laid the foundations for racial science and the eugenic application of public health and welfare. Although this institutional rationale was disavowed in the wake of the Holocaust, this epistemology remains axiomatic to the field of public policy. With increasingly sophisticated information technologies, however, reflexive

¹¹³ Translation mine. François Rabelais, *Gargantua et Pantagruel*, Book III, Volume II, trans. H. Clouzot (Paris: Bibliothèque Larousse, 1913), 10–11.

¹¹⁴ Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76* (New York: Picador, 1997), 239–63; and Foucault, *Birth of Bio-politics*.

¹¹⁵ Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). Also see James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999); and Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002).

models that reflect subjective knowledge as objective facts are being replaced by recursive algorithms that process objective facts as objective knowledge. Once they are designed, recursive models incorporate their own output as new input, creating patterns from information without cognitive mediation. The patterns that they produce are not generalizing representations of reality; they are real in their own particularity, generating a virtual landscape that is concrete as well as abstract. Insofar as they directly inform policy and prices, these real facts have sociological agency with material effects.

The integrating infrastructure that is dreamt of by African finance ministers is already a reality in the sociotechnical states of late capitalism. Like Marx's doubly-free worker, however, the person who has been emancipated from informal relations of credit and debt encounters a new form of domination. Today's platform economy enforces obligations through automated surveillance: hidden cameras, digital footprints, and consolidating databases ensure that your debtors know where you live.¹¹⁶ Information presented by individuals to qualify for a loan or government benefit—and increasingly the data that they generate unwittingly when they use their cell phones or shop on the internet—is disaggregated and processed by algorithms that measure the environment as a complex system of prices. Like organic systems, platforms self-structure as they adapt to new information. “Whereas a market is depicted as place, people, and commodities,” writes Jane Guyer, “a platform is made up of built components and applications, from which actions are performed outward into a world that is not itself depicted.”¹¹⁷ This world cannot be depicted because there is no external position from which to observe it. Unlike

¹¹⁶ Sosahana Zubloff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (New York: Hachette, 2020).

¹¹⁷ Jane Guyer, “From Market to Platform: Shifting Analytics for the Study of Current Capitalism,” in *Legacies, Logics, Logistics: Essays in the Anthropology of the Platform Economy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 114.

institutions, which confront the person as a discrete entity, we are already part of the platform: as a body within a population, a mind with preferences, and a statistical aggregate of past and potential decisions.

Indeed, participation in a complex adaptive system more resembles the indebtedness of gift economies than the market-mediated autonomy of neoliberalism. Anthropologists have contested the Eurocentric hegemony of the rights-bearing subject, “that hyphenated Cartesian figure epitomized in the Promethean hero of Universal History” with a “fractal” model of personhood. As Jean and John Comaroff elaborate with respect to the Tswana of South Africa, human beings managing kinship demands and occult interference “present partial, refractory aspects of one’s person—of one’s property, projects, interests—to the various others who shared the same coordinates of the life-world.”¹¹⁸ Likewise, platforms do not engender relations of subjective individuality in which desires are expressed as linear intentions, but transpersonal relations of objective “dividuality” in which those desires and intentions take on a mimetic life of their own in confluence with the desires and intentions of others. Like gifts, financial instruments convert this experiential flux into manageable risk by establishing relations in spacetime.¹¹⁹ It has been observed that financialization replaces the worker-consumer relation of productive capitalism and the citizen-nation relation of the liberal state with risk-takers, who are in a position to derive wealth from uncertainty, and risk-bearers, who must cultivate resilience to crisis.¹²⁰ Key to this formulation is the collapse of the duality itself: all risk-takers bear risk, and

¹¹⁸ John L. and Jean Comaroff, “On Personhood: An Anthropological Perspective from Africa,” *Social Identities* 7, no. 2 (2001): 267–83.

¹¹⁹ See the essays by Benjamin Lee, Edward LiPuma, and Arjun Appadurai in *Derivatives and the Wealth of Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); and Hirokazu Miyazaki, “The Gift in Finance,” *NatureCulture* 2 (2013): 38–47.

¹²⁰ Bill Maurer, “Forget Locke? From Proprietor to Risk-Bearer in New Logics of Finance,” *Public Culture* 11 (1999): 47–67; Arjun Appadurai. *The Future as a Cultural Fact* (London: Verso, 2013).

all risk-bearers must take risks in order to make a life, however unequal the fruits of their speculation. Indeed, the more precarious the conditions under which my informants found themselves, the more likely they were to diversify their options and revise their commitments when their expectations did not pan out.

In this respect, financialization indicates a departure from the logic of commodity fetishism. This is not to say that consumer goods, political rights, and the reflexive models of the social sciences do not continue to command the fidelity of their users. It is to bring attention to how these fetishes operate, independently of this attachment, as a self-generating technology. As self-valorizing value, capital is both fixed in the form of the fetish and circulates as potential value. Any form of material, human, or social capital may be owned as identity or leveraged as part of a portfolio that hedges risk. When a person's possessions, talents, and relationships are treated as assets, over-identification may prevent the liquidity that secures accumulation under volatile conditions. This is how financialization undermines the entrepreneurial self-production of sovereign subjectivity. As both an economic and legal category, human capital exemplifies the logic of the fetish: a material site of divine forces with the power to fulfill desires and intentions, as well as assuage guilt and longing. In contrast, "portfolio personhood" is a bundled, risk-bearing form of agency in which personal and relational attributes are liquid assets of contingent price. People may mitigate risk by investing in a diversity of experiences, interests, commitments, and relationships in order to hedge a position—that is, not to produce or consume objects but to persist by arbitraging differences in a field of possibilities. Those with more capital at their disposal may take an aggressive position, bearing more risk in the hope of higher returns. Others must settle for "making do" as a form of survival.

This pattern of practice is evident in the immigration system, which constitutes a permanent state of exception from the rule of law. In the United States, the plenary power doctrine of the Constitution grants the executive branch absolute authority over immigration enforcement, including the adjudication of appeals. Thus freed from the oversight of judicial review, the immigration bureaucracy—like colonial administration in Africa and elsewhere—has historically served as a laboratory for the governance of bodies through the processing of data points of all kinds.¹²¹ If and until immigrants become naturalized, they are economic but not political participants in the communities of which they are part of, a contradiction that has produced a history of abuse and advocacy.¹²² Traditionally, this advocacy has been framed in terms of migrant rights, a plea for the recognition of bourgeois subjectivity that, as Arendt well understood, has been doomed from the start. Gains have been made and lost depending on the shifting political climate and the demand for migrant workers. At the international level, states have been unwavering in the preservation of border control as a defining feature of national sovereignty.¹²³ Nevertheless, the intensification of migration that is associated with globalization has galvanized greater coordination among states in the interest of “migration management.”

The mobilization of human rights as a token of humanitarian goodwill is a key feature of biopolitics. Thus, it should come as no surprise that human rights have taken on new currency in

¹²¹ Susan Bibler Coutin et al., “Routine Exceptionality: The Plenary Power Doctrine, Immigrants, and the Indigenous Under U.S. Law,” *University of California Irvine Law Review* 4 (2014): 97–120. On colonial administration as laboratory of modern governance, see John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution, Vol. II* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); and Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts*.

¹²² See Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); and Aristide Zolberg, *A Nation by Design: Immigration Policy in the Fashioning of America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

¹²³ This has been a particularly contentious issue for the states of the European Union, which accepted free movement as a condition of membership but have redoubled their efforts to prevent “third country” nationals from breaching the regional boundary. See Etienne Balibar, *We, the People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

the global governance of migration.¹²⁴ States have expressed new appreciation for the development potential of remittances and new concerns about the health implications of human mobility. In policy debates, the concern with suffering operates directly as a discursive function, expressing intentions that have immediate efficacy without reference to actual practices of exploitation and exclusion. Meanwhile, in the trenches of humanitarian action, care workers participate in a moral economy of political neutrality as they apply diagnostic and therapeutic techniques to the victims of politics. In their attention to suffering bodies and minds, they join *homo sacri* in their state of exception, ostensibly with them but also against them in sovereign discretion with respect to the abject other. Not only is this “a moral relationship with no possible reciprocity,” but it also serves a critical function within the global military and developmental apparatus dedicated to securing fragile systems from imminent threat.¹²⁵ A growing anthropological literature interrogates the ethos of compassion that drives the fieldwork of both ethnographers and aid workers. The testimony they produce, as Didier Fassin argues, is a source of empathy and information within an administrative machine that manages precarious lives as a technical problem rather than a symptom of injustice.¹²⁶

Within the immigration bureaucracy, whether a migrant is a victim or a suspect depends on a discretionary determination that is both arbitrary and justifiable. Adjudication trends over

¹²⁴ Susan Gal, “Registers in Circulation: Social Organization of Interdiscursivity,” *Signs and Society* 6, no. 1 (2018):1–24.

¹²⁵ Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012), 16.

¹²⁶ For example, see Miriam Ticktin and Ilana Feldman, eds., *In the Name of Humanity: The Government of Threat and Care* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2010); and Erica Bornstein and Peter Redfield, eds., *Forces of Compassion: Humanitarianism Between Ethics and Politics* (Santa Fe, NM: School for Advanced Research Press, 2011).

time reveal the influence of political circumstances that are continually in flux.¹²⁷ For a particular applicant, however, the designation of “deserving migrant” reflects the relative risk of one’s portfolio. On one hand, a financially solvent applicant with demonstrable human and social capital may appear as an asset to the state. A productive migrant has the added advantage of serving as a vector of development financing, a win-win situation for states that wish to increase their influence in emerging economies at minimal cost. On the other hand, potential risk for the migrant may elicit asylum, an option that the state is compelled to offer under international law. Country of origin is a significant factor in this determination of risk. Citizenship operates here not as a form of national belonging but as a brand name that can be leveraged as a property right that serves as collateral with which to contract debts. Under financialization, the primary obligation of the citizen is to observe the discipline of payments. Accordingly, most migrants satisfy their debt to the state by making a good living, or at least avoiding any form of public assistance. Refugees satisfy their debt by continuing to prove their “well-grounded fear of persecution,” remaining in exile from their countries of origin until they are naturalized. The possibility that they will become a public charge, however, is a risk that the state takes on as a sacrificial gesture of humanitarian relief.

That refugees are theoretically entitled to asylum is a point of contention within the contemporary apparatus of migration management. Contrary to Arendt, they are actually the exception to the exception of bare life, at least insofar as they manage to receive recognition. Unlike the migrants who drown in the Mediterranean, perish in the Arizona desert, and labor in sweatshops, the figure of the refugee is the embodiment of an international “responsibility to

¹²⁷ Kevin R. Johnson, *The “Huddled Masses” Myth: Immigration and Civil Rights* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004).

protect,” a fetish that has persevered as a designation under international law, despite the specificity of the Refugee Convention to the political circumstances of the Cold War.¹²⁸ As Arendt predicted, states are increasingly reluctant to grant asylum or accept refugees from abroad. Questioning obligations to a 1951 agreement, they have distanced themselves from binding multilateral commitments in favor of voluntary compliance with “soft law” guidelines, such as those used to coordinate international trade and finance.¹²⁹ For example, after an unprecedented flow of migrants into Europe triggered a regional political crisis in 2015, the United Nations negotiated two Global Compacts, one on refugees and one on migration, in which states acknowledged the complexities of population mobility and displacement without committing institutional resources to address them.¹³⁰ At the same time, the newly designated UN Migration Agency announced an “Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration Program” that has been heavily criticized by human rights groups for being less than voluntary, and preparations for return being less than adequate for reintegration. Under such circumstances, the preservation of the distinction between refugee and migrant appears as a case of “categorical fetishism,” a problem of classificatory rigidity in a world where most migrants are forced to flee from political conflict, climate change, or privations that do not qualify as grounds for asylum.¹³¹ Yet these legitimate criticisms overlook the ritual power of asylum adjudication, in which the refugee is a token of survival under incredible odds.

¹²⁸ On figuration, see Hayden White, *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

¹²⁹ Chris Brummer, *Minilateralism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

¹³⁰ Lisa M. Simeone and Nicola Piper, “From Rights to Risk: Labour Migration and the Securitization of Justice,” in *Handbook of Migration and Global Justice*, eds. L. Weber and C. Tazreiter (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2021).

¹³¹ Heaven Crawley and Dimitris Skleparis, “Refugees, Migrants, Neither, Both: Categorical Fetishism and the Politics of Bounding in Europe’s ‘Migration Crisis,’” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44, no. 1 (2017): 48–64.

Humanitarian reasoning has two sides within the political economy of financialized capitalism. Most evidently, it is a platform from which to take a stand against injustice. This ethnography is full of cases in which foreclosures, biased legal processes, exploitative conditions of employment, and civil wars presented opportunities for advocacy with mixed results. These efforts and their results also constituted a moment of capital in which signs of suffering—as information and affect—were mobilized by my informants as well as their opponents as real facts that could be converted into assets under certain conditions. It is certainly the case that this form of “making do” perpetuates the systemic dynamics that it is attempting to ameliorate. So it is with migration, more generally, when understood as an act of arbitrage that seeks marginal gains by bridging borders. Migration may represent an opportunity for wealth redistribution that is consistent with the logic of household risk management currently being promoted by development agencies.¹³² However, no amount of financial literacy can mitigate the impact of legal and economic precarity, racial discrimination, illness, and injury that accompany that risk. Under these conditions, migrants and their advocates discover that while following the rules is no guarantee of success, knowing the rules is a strategy for identifying viable options when they fail.

Is this a cynical position for the engaged scholar? Didier Fassin, who as a physician and an anthropologist has divided his career between humanitarian work and a critique of those efforts, writes that a focus on human suffering “reduces violence to the trauma, and the subject to victim.” Depoliticized and dehistoricized, he argues, the moral project to save others is driven by a sentimental attachment to real facts without truth, the collective struggle for justice. Lucidly

¹³² Kebede Refera Matewos et al., “Financial Literacy for Developing Countries in Africa: A Review of Concept, Significance and Research Opportunities.” *Journal of African Studies and Development* 8, no. 1 (2016): 1–12.

identifying the duality between the transcendent objectivity of the analyst and the immanent subjectivity of the constructivist, Fassin locates himself at the threshold of Plato's cave, "not in an undecided in-between position, but in one from where it is possible to go inside and outside, alternatively."¹³³ Looking backwards from this critical position, the history of colonialism as a civilizing mission is only one example of how good intentions can serve as a gloss on the will to power. Yet insofar as the truth of justice is determined by a history that changes with time, how can he be sure that his standpoint is really at the threshold and not among the philosopher kings? That there is no politics without history does not mean that history can ground a true politics. Amidst the proliferating array of claims and counterclaims, whose story would that be? And whose politics?

Knowing Practice

"Let's cross the river by feeling for stones." In *A Way of Life*, Judith Farquhar cites this proverb as it was invoked by Deng Xiaoping during China's early reform period, as Maoist-Leninist orthodoxy was being replaced by an explicit modernizing pragmatism. Farquhar's elaboration is worth quoting at length:

If this proverb is read too narrowly, one might miss the feeling of bare feet groping along the unstable bottom of a rushing stream, its waters hiding from our sight the contours of the *things*—those partly obscured stones—that demand such nervous care. Knowledge of the situation, a sense of the terrain, is sketchy under circumstances of rapid flow. Imagine the dangers of this operation, as you negotiate your footing on objects that provide no stable ground and in flowing water that nudges you downstream with possibly treacherous currents. At first, when you're standing on the bank looking at the water's surface, most streams would seem to afford many crossing points. But once you've tentatively taken a step or two into the water, your options for ways of fording the stream are progressively reduced. No amount of good thinking or advance planning is going to guarantee safe arrival on the other bank. With your eyes open but still half blind, you have to commit yourself to a course of action, one step at a time. As you go you must live with the consequences of each step—the right foot choosing to rely on a downstream

¹³³ Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason*, 485.

stone makes another possible foothold upstream, more to the left, unfeasible forever. Possibly, as you pick your way across the stream, you would reconsider your destination: why, again, did I want to be on that other shore? But this uncertainty can usually be answered confidently. One doesn't often have much choice about the destination¹³⁴

Arbitrage is a more prosaic metaphor for the challenges of migration. Yet it captures one dimension that is missing from this eloquent description. With respect to the practice of Chinese medicine, “it would seem that doctor and patient, clinics and medicines, physiological and pathological processes, are fording that stream together, negotiating and ‘engaging’ the confusions of practice with many things at risk of dissolving washing away, turning out to be other than expected.”¹³⁵ In the more literal case of border crossing, however, passage forms pathways that invite more use—fjords are identified, boulders are rearranged, and eventually a bridge is built between banks. The bridge appears as though it were always already there, a social structure that both facilitates and constrains movement. Flow attracts parasites and becomes a system: vendors set up shop, the state manages the traffic, and traffickers identify new channels for unauthorized customers willing to take the risk. Bridges create new borders, and borders create new bridges. Thus, if the institutionalization of the crossing interferes with the improvisational solidarities among the crossers, it also creates the conditions for its own interference. “In the system,” writes Michel Serres, “noise and message exchange roles according to the position of the observer and the action of the actor, but they are transformed into one another as well as a function of time and of the system.”¹³⁶ This is how arbitrage works: converting order into disorder while disorder erupts somewhere else.

¹³⁴ Judith Farquhar, *A Way of Life: Things, Thought, and Action in Chinese Medicine* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020), 78, 83.

¹³⁵ Farquhar, 95.

¹³⁶ Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. L. Schehr (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1982), 66. Also see Paul Kockelman, “Enemies, Parasites, and Noise: How to Take Up Residence in a System Without Becoming a Term in It,” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 20, no. 2 (2010): 406–21.

It is a phenomenological truism that order exists only where we create it. Because language is the medium through which that order is articulated, semiotics has this in common with law: the conceptual organization of sense impressions is never complete. Signs both represent and constitute their object in a pragmatic circuit that also operates metapragmatically, in response to its own movement. The aporia between a particular token and the general type takes the form of a referential index that directs energy and attention towards an object.¹³⁷ We call this index our intention and bracket whatever is outside that frame of reference. The index models action, yet the realization of intention is an open question. J. L. Austin famously argued that barring certain “infelicities,” the force of the speech act bridges the gap between actuality and intention by “doing things with words.” But does this performative agency belong to the speaker or to the words themselves? Does an actor own her intentions? Austin treats “parasitic uses of language,” such as telling jokes or acting in a play, as exceptions to the rule of ordinary speech, which is grounded in the authority of origin.¹³⁸ Like Agamben, Jacques Derrida argues that, on the contrary, the exception is the rule. All signals are distinguished by noise because they are “iterable,” a word derived from the Sanskrit *itara* for “other.”¹³⁹ Meaning is difference in repetition: particular content that is intelligible by virtue of its general form, the structural absence of both the sender and the receiver of a communication.

¹³⁷ According to Michael Silverstein, typical identities are associated with tokens of value through the inter-discursivity of micro-contexts. Michael Silverstein, “Indexical Order and the Dialectics of Sociolinguistic Life,” *Language and Communication* 23 (2003): 193–229. Also see Susan Gal, *Registers in Circulation*.

¹³⁸ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1962), 104.

¹³⁹ “As the condition of possibility and of impossibility, with all the paradoxes to which this last formula constrains us, iterability retains a value of generality that covers the totality of what one can call experience or the relation to something in general.” Jacques Derrida, *Limited, Inc.*, trans. S. Weber and J. Mehlman (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 124. My discussion also draws from Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. P. Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

The condition of possibility that a performance will come off is simultaneously its condition of impossibility. It is impossible that the meaning of an act will retain any purity of intention, however sincere its originator. The possibility of performative failure is not an accident that can be prevented with care. It is internal to the structure of language and by extension of human agency itself. This is what Serres is getting at when he remarks that neither the indexical frame nor its content is stable; the passage of time brings about both change in the system and a shift of attention. Time, with its plethora of “parasitic” interventions, is the noise that estranges the agent from her own performance.¹⁴⁰ It tears at the texture of experience that is sutured with stories, interpretations that rationalize correlation as the causation that orders the world. Performance generates the real abstractions of fetish and fact: its efficacy is the *salto mortale* that realizes value, truth, and meaning by disavowing the abyss that makes it possible and necessary. The indeterminacy at the heart of action is a fundamental philosophical problem famously articulated by David Hume in rejecting the Cartesian proof that being is the logical extension of thought. “Upon the whole, we may conclude, that ’tis impossible in any one instance to show the principle, in which the force and agency of a cause is plac’d; and that the most refin’d and most vulgar understandings are equally at a loss in this particular.”¹⁴¹ Hume was preoccupied with the ethical implications of his skeptical position. What is our responsibility for effects that cannot be attributed to the cause of our intentions?

The meaning that we make of our activity, as material bodies and as users of language, is a form of accounting. Subjectivity is a contranym: freedom of action implies that the self is not only the creative “subject of” an act but also “subject to” the consequences of that act. The

¹⁴⁰ “Was the noise really a message? Wasn’t it, rather, static, a parasite? A parasite who has the last word, who produces disorder and who generates a different order.” Serres, *The Parasite*, 3.

¹⁴¹ David Hume, *Treatise on Human Nature* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009), 107.

subject is a living contradiction, which is another way of saying that its coherence is a real abstraction, a fiction with efficacy. The unity of an intention and its effects, the capacity to execute a plan, is the presupposition that both grounds modernity and represses its waste. The content that falls outside the frame of reference cannot be contained and returns repeatedly as trauma that takes form not only as the suffering victim of humanitarian intervention but also the righteous anger of the activist and the resentment of the supremacist. Intentional practices that directly or indirectly resulted in domination and exploitation confront us now on a planetary scale, rewriting the script of subjects as masters of their destinies. The atrophied side of the contronym dominates today's finance economy: the freedom of responsibility for debts that far exceeds the culpability and capacity of the individual. Threatened by global warming, we are accountable to our children as well as our ancestors. It is a debt burden that, along with the sociotechnical apparatus that perpetuates and enforces it, brings the fiction of the sovereign subject into crisis, just as the migrant disrupts the sovereign state. Uncertain of intentions and wary of their effects, a person can only counter paralysis by taking on the risk and responsibility of acting with the "cruel optimism" that things will work out, at least for a while.¹⁴²

The central concern of this dissertation is the problem of meaningful agency in the absence of a *habitus*. Pierre Bourdieu uses this Latin term to describe everyday interactions as a field of possibilities that is self-structuring, constrained by the collective memory of convention. Like Serres and Derrida, Bourdieu rejects functionalist models that explain social phenomena based on representations of order: "To treat a work of plastic art as a discourse intended to be

¹⁴² Lauren Berlant explored this collective post-recession predicament in *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011). As Shakespeare's Hamlet reminds us, radical events are defined by their power to provoke existential crisis. What is unique about the current juncture is the universality of this experience.

interpreted, decoded, by reference to a transcendent code analogous to the Saussurian ‘langue’ is to forget that ... the work of art always contains something ineffable, not by excess, as hagiography would have it, but by default, something which communicates, so to speak, from body to body, i.e., on the hither side of words or concepts, and which pleases (or displeases) without concepts.”¹⁴³ Unlike laws and institutions that explicitly proscribe behavior, internalized norms of behavior leave room for creative improvisations that derive efficacy from the possibility that the performance might not come off. Success reflects not compliance with an abstract design but the mastery of participants within a system that hangs together through their mutual activity. In this way, the *habitus* is a “generative schema,” recursive programming that conditions experience by configuring expectations of the near future.¹⁴⁴ But what happens when we run out of time?

This is a question that has defined the experience of capitalism. In the late 1980s, as capital markets were moving to the center of the global economy, David Harvey described postmodernity as a condition of time-space compression that infused everyday life with volatility, ephemerality, and anxiety.¹⁴⁵ His analysis was based on Marx’s insight that the tendency for the rate of profit to fall had an accelerating effect on production. Capitalists sought to increase the yield from labor time, what Marx called “absolute surplus value,” through global supply chains that exploited low-wage workers abroad. Most importantly, however, was growing

¹⁴³ “Even in cases in which the agents’ *habitus* are perfectly harmonized and the interlocking of actions and reactions is totally predictable from outside, uncertainty remains as to the outcome of the interaction as long as the sequence has not been completed.” Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. R. Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 1.

¹⁴⁴ See Jane Guyer, “Prophecy and the Near Future: Thoughts on Macroeconomic, Evangelical, and Punctuated Time,” in *Legacies, Logics, Logistics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 89–109; and Lisa Adkins, “Practice as Temporalisation: Bourdieu and Economic Crisis,” in *The Legacy of Pierre Bourdieu: Critical Essays*, eds. S. Susen and B. S. Turner (London: Anthem Press, 2011).

¹⁴⁵ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*. (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1989), 201–323.

investment in the relative surplus value of new technologies, which reduced both the labor and time required to produce ever greater quantities. Like the Little Tramp in Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*, workers caught up in the machinery of progress would eventually be thrown out altogether as the treadmill effect of capital accumulation increased wealth of decreasing value. "Because it is a temporal form of wealth," argues Moishe Postone, "capital strives toward boundlessness, ignoring, as it were, the necessary material boundedness of its natural environment, the planet."¹⁴⁶

The objective alienation of human producers from the value of their time is mirrored in the work of Max Weber by the subjective alienation of monetary accumulation. Weber's account of modernity centers on the uncertainty that accompanies the loss of God. The ideological pivot from the shared substance of Catholicism to the secular individual was the doctrine of predestination, which severed the relation between life and salvation. A believer could not earn a stairway to heaven because, as the Calvinist Hume stressed, God's will is inaccessible to human consciousness. Nevertheless, a devout life was a sign of grace. For "rational misers" like Ben Franklin, "money is of the prolific, generating nature," a security that promises eternal life as a return on investments in value. That the secularizing influence of wealth substituted monetary for moral accounting only intensified the existential pressure to accumulate credit before death as the sign of a meaningful life. Thus, instrumental rationality was not a rejection of theology but a displacement of it by "specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart" who attempted to valorize the time that remains with money.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁶ Moishe Postone, "The Current Crisis," 50.

¹⁴⁷ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. T. Parsons (London: Routledge, 2005), 124. See Benjamin Lee, "From Primitives to Derivatives," in *Derivatives and the Wealth of Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 2016), 82–139.

The Great Recession reinforced the message that time is money and that money buys time. Millions of debts came due as people lost their capacity to roll over loans one more month. The banks foreclosed on so many homes that the courts were overburdened with appeals. People stopped spending money, workers were laid off and replaced by machines in obvious places like grocery stores and parking lots. Deportations picked up, and the police got more aggressive in black neighborhoods. For my informants—and for myself—these experiences had what Bourdieu called a “hysteresis effect” in which familiar practices of everyday life fall out of sync with changing conditions.¹⁴⁸ Anthropologists of finance have portrayed a similar experience of disorientation among traders, whose *habitus* also required translating near-future possibilities into action in the present. In her ethnography of the Chicago Board of Trade, Caitlin Zaloom’s informants describe themselves as ethical actors reflexively cultivating “the proper relationship between thinking and acting in the market,” who create that market through their embodied knowledge of it.¹⁴⁹ With the global seizure in investor confidence that accompanied the mortgage crisis, these traders confronted themselves as an archetype of unethical behavior in the public imagination. The European and Chinese financial professionals in Horacio Ortiz’s ethnography cling to market efficiency as a legitimizing narrative that attributes global inequality to the political and moral shortcomings of participants who do not honor the value of the system.¹⁵⁰ Some of Hirokazu Miyazaki’s Japanese informants, in contrast, took the crisis more personally,

¹⁴⁸ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory*, 78, 83.

¹⁴⁹ Caitlin Zaloom, *Out of the Pits: Traders and Technology from Chicago to London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

¹⁵⁰ Horacio Ortiz, “What Financial Crisis? The Global Politics of the Financial Industry: Distributional Consequences and Legitimizing Narratives,” in *Economy for and Against Democracy*, ed. Keith Hart and J. Sharp (New York: Berghahn, 2015), 39–57.

concluding that “finance is nothing but a fraud.”¹⁵¹ In Miyazaki’s account, the principle of no-arbitrage, which had sustained a belief in the rationality of timeless gain, became a metaphor for the temporal incongruities of life itself.

My informants reacted to the crisis in ways that were only partially visible. People often told me that they weren’t sure what to do because they didn’t know what to expect. Intimate shifts in habits of mind and body were alluded to obliquely or presented as withdrawal, recklessness, or paranoia. An interesting comparison can be found in ethnographies of Africa during periods of radical instability. René Devisch, for example, describes the nostalgia, violence, and fragmentation of socio-temporal displacement in the final years of the former Zaire. “By force of mimetic effort, many of them adopted a literal collage of personalities, exhibiting little continuity among them: they adopted a particular identity in the diurnal and public space, another in the ludic social context of the bar, and yet another when returning to children and partner in the domestic and conjugal domain.”¹⁵² Like Devisch, my Congolese informants talked about “Article 15,” the self-enforcing law of the street, as a form of making do that occupied a liminal space-time of social discontinuity. Masters of the *libanga*, the art of survival with pleasure, operated very much like financial traders, straddling worlds and manipulating the idle frenzy of capital circulation to their advantage. “For them,” writes Devisch,

¹⁵¹ Hirokazu Miyazaki, *Arbitraging Japan: Dreams of Capitalism at the End of Finance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 1.

¹⁵² René Devisch, “Frenzy, Violence, and Ethical Renewal in Kinshasa,” *Public Culture* 7 (1995): 601. While the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is an extreme case, socio-temporal displacement is a prevalent theme for anthropologists who have worked in postcolonial Africa. In addition to works already cited, see John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992); Charles Piot, *Nostalgia for the Future: West Africa After the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); and Anne-Maria Makhulu, “The Condition for After Work: Financialization and Informalization in Posttransition South Africa,” *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association* 127, no. 4 (2012): 782–99.

“money is no longer a medium of purchase, but rather a compensation or indemnification not for things, but for a gift of life.”¹⁵³

The crisis of 2008 similarly brought the viability of a *habitus* into question. Bourdieu argues the practical knowledge through which social actors maintain relations with others is “a spontaneous semiology” that must operate unconsciously at the level of “bodily hexis” and tacit agreement in order to function effectively.¹⁵⁴ Here Bourdieu draws inspiration from Wittgenstein, who responded to Hume’s paradox by differentiating the rule of morality from ethical action: “It is clear that ethics cannot be put into words.”¹⁵⁵ The moment an expectation is asserted, it assumes moral form, a prohibition positing its own violation, and thereby becomes a model that is set up to fail. Private property assumes the existence of theft, for example, just as the regulators of a border assume it will be crossed. This is why Austin’s speech act is only successful insofar as it expresses existing authority; agents of the law disassociate their activity from its counter-performative dimension. So do most financiers, despite the tendency of their algorithms to produce a *habitus* of price discovery that deviates from the expectations for which they were designed.¹⁵⁶ The subprime mortgage crisis was not only a consequence of poor

¹⁵³ Devisch, *Frenzy, Violence, and Ethnic Renewal*, 624.

¹⁵⁴ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory*, 10.

¹⁵⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness, (London: Routledge, 1961), 86. Bourdieu refers to Wittgenstein many times in *Outline on a Theory of Practice*. See, for example, his discussion of Wittgenstein’s question: “What do I call ‘the rule by which he proceeds?’” Bourdieu, 29. The passage to which Bourdieu alludes in Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* revisits the precept “It is clear that ethics cannot be expressed” from the earlier *Tractatus* in the form of a question rather than an assertion, a speech act that violates its own meaning.” See Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. E. Anscombe (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1958), 38–39.

¹⁵⁶ Social theorists differ in how they conceptualize the “negative performativity” of financial models. Michel Callon and Donald MacKenzie have applied Austinian performativity to derivative pricing patterns with some ambiguity with regards to the ontology of “misfires.” See Callon, “What Does it Mean to Say That Economics is Performative?” in *Do Economists Make Markets? On the Performativity of Economics*, ed. D. MacKenzie et al. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 323; Alice

regulation and rampant greed, though these factors surely played a part; it also indicated the failure of a model to reproduce the presuppositions for strategic action.

The recession was surely a moment of reckoning. For a while, the messages dispersed and our lives were flooded with noise. Yet the noise was always part of the message. “Noise makes financial markets possible, but also makes them imperfect.”¹⁵⁷ Fischer Black delivered this message to the American Finance Association a decade after he and Myron Scholes developed a differential equation that revolutionized capital markets. Their model allowed for the construction of risk-neutral investment portfolios by continually adjusting derivative trading positions in relation to the primary assets on which they are based. This hedging strategy is based on the principle of non-arbitrage, the fundamental presupposition of market equilibrium. Yet the Black-Scholes equation also allows traders to identify arbitrage opportunities by mapping the possible prices of a derivative as multiple states at a given time. Programmed into a computer, the algorithm performs the “dynamic replication” of a portfolio, operationalizing iteration by extracting value from difference in repetition, the noise that is intrinsic to the information on which it is based. “The norm becomes deviant, the deviancy becomes the norm,” writes Benjamin Lee, comparing this process with the innovation cycles of Marx’s relative surplus value. “Capitalism is an arbitrage-driven performative chiasmus continually in motion.”¹⁵⁸

Models do not only represent a reality they measure; they create a disparity with that reality and in so doing, participate in that reality. Like ritual and speech, as Lee and his collaborators emphasize, a financial transaction is an event that creates an instance of what it

Bamford and Donald MacKenzie, “Counterperformativity,” *New Left Review* 113 (2018): 97–121; and Judith Butler, “Performative Agency,” *Journal of Cultural Economy* 3, no. 2 (2010): 147–61.

¹⁵⁷ Fischer Black, “Noise,” *The Journal of Finance* 41, no. 3 (1986): 530.

¹⁵⁸ Lee, *From Primitives to Derivatives*, 128.

represents by representing it, instantiating the token of a type.¹⁵⁹ Richard Nixon's formal suspension of the gold standard on August 15, 1971, after it had ceased to operate in practice, was a ritual event initiating a political shift from state-led fiscal policy to market-led monetarism predicated on the principle of non-arbitrage. This was the condition of possibility for Black-Scholes to make money counter-performatively by turning noise into information and thereby eliminating the disparity. Yet as Black understood, each act of arbitrage is instantaneous and discrete. They are acts without the cumulative effect of a more perfect market because knowledge is always incomplete, and contingency is intrinsic both to the passage of time and our efforts to direct it, however sophisticated our technologies of control.¹⁶⁰ At the time of his 1985 address, Black anticipated that "research will be seen as a process leading to reliable and relevant conclusions only very rarely, because of the noise that creeps in at every step."¹⁶¹ Two years later, an unexpected stock market crash tempered collective belief in the accuracy of financial models, *but not their effectiveness*. Although the market began to deviate from predictions, engineers found that they could trust the model anyway by calculating backwards, from the price to the volatility it measures, deriving the real from the appearance.¹⁶² In a parallel development, Alan Greenspan found that publicizing the intentions of the Federal Reserve had a direct effect on market behavior without the need for policy action.¹⁶³ In private and public sectors, the ideal

¹⁵⁹ Lee, 92.

¹⁶⁰ Black points out that much of the data that is plugged into theoretical models are fabrications. "For example, wealth is often a key variable in estimating any demand curve. But wealth is itself unobservable." Black, "Noise," 536.

¹⁶¹ Black, 530.

¹⁶² Lee cites his colleague and quantitative analyst, Emmanuel Derman: "I would say that Black-Scholes is the language in which we try to express its own internal inadequacies, like Wittgenstein's attempt with ordinary language. You cannot get away from it yet." Lee, *From Primitives to Derivatives*, 90.

¹⁶³ Krippner, *Capitalizing on Crisis*, 129–32.

of the self-regulating market was enacted and narrated through ritual performance, even—and especially—when it failed.

I found a similar dynamic at work among my informants as we explored strategies for adjusting to a changed reality. As migrants from countries with repeated economic, political, and environmental crises, many of my informants were skilled at systematically hedging away risk to leverage the uncertainty of volatility. If they did not assume a state of equilibrium, they presupposed a social network that would provide the resources to overcome deficits. Their work of arbitrage actualized that expectation in ways that could be said to substantiate Bourdieu's model of a *habitus*. Yet I cannot say that “the more the conditions of production of dispositions resemble the conditions in which they function to produce ordinary practices, the more socially successful, and therefore unconscious, these practices will be.”¹⁶⁴ My informants did not live in the context in which their dispositions had been produced, yet their ordinary practices were often extremely successful. In addition, they performed strategically—and with explicit intention—in scenarios that included the law.

For Bourdieu, it is paradoxical for strategic action to serve collective interests when it is mandated. It is not the *logos* that enforces practice but the *nomos*, the unwritten rules that cannot be expressed, *pace* Wittgenstein, because they are enacted freely rather than in submission. Explicit moral precepts, in this case, indicate a failure of implicit ethical behavior. Yet as Derrida points out, the presupposition of “the conditions of production of dispositions” as well as their function to produce ordinary practices determines chains of signification between context and practice, author and act.¹⁶⁵ Bourdieu's association of a behavioral disposition with particular

¹⁶⁴ Bourdieu, *Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), 145.

¹⁶⁵ Derrida, *Limited*, 18. Also see Butler, “Performative Agency, 152.

conditions of possibility, like Austin's reduction of the illocutionary speech act to the intention of the speaker, preserves the "outside" of an analysis that can talk about time without being in it.

Any attempt to understand experience forces a separation of form and content, establishing a hierarchical relation of knowledge that disavows its own entailments. This is why Ben Lee can say that "the stochastic modeling of possibility does not apply to trading," and Bourdieu can say that "the precepts of custom ... have nothing in common with the transcendent rules of a juridical code."¹⁶⁶ Bourdieu's "logic of practice" is exclusively concerned with the concrete dimension of everyday life. However, the stasis of his epistemological authority is the exception to the practical knowledge that emerges from the *habitus*. When he argues that people cannot be fully conscious of their most authentic activity, he is treating an ontological problem of existential indeterminacy—a limit of being—as an epistemological one of relative consciousness—a limit of knowledge. This allows him to occupy a position of reflexive insight from which to draw a map of the world, reproducing just the "synoptic illusion" he critiques. This is the totalizing effect of any explanatory scheme.

While oppositions clarify one's analytical and moral position, they do not stay separate in the mix of doing and being. Wherever the action is, people will do unexpected things and define their experience in new ways, adjusting their representations of the real. It appeared to me that people engaged in the improvisations of making do with varying degrees of reflexivity. What mattered, however, was not the form of their self-knowledge but the unknowability of the future and the ways in which it operated as certainty in the present. It is relevant to note that the Latin word for "to make" is *facere*, which also translates as "to do" and is the root word of both

¹⁶⁶ Lee, *From Primitives to Derivatives*, 88; Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory*, 17.

“fetish” and “fact.”¹⁶⁷ Contradictions such as the gift (a voluntary obligation) or arbitrage (bridging a boundary that should not exist) appear in time as events with potential value. Do they require misrecognition to work? Or is that misrecognition itself a real fact that circulates, even while fixed as a form of capital in Bourdieu’s representation?

The problem of ethical action confronts this writer with every decision she has made in this ethnography. This dissertation is at least as much about memory as it is about the many other topics that spill over its pages. As a topic, memory is verification, mimetic connection, and history at once. Ethically, it is about what people remember of their pasts and what I remember of their memories, which is far removed indeed. What I share is the collective memory of history that I find reflected in every encounter and interview, even in my closest relationships. I have read a great deal of secondary material about the settings for their lives, before and during the time I have known them. And then there is the writer’s dilemma, the relation between the particular experience and its universal gestures, both as they are embedded in the scene and as they frame the observation itself. Barbara Kingsolver wrote her own conflicted history as a child of human rights in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) during the Congo Crisis. Here I bring the momentum of my own time in Guatemala as an anthropologist’s daughter during a civil war about which my mother was unaware. Here I also write between the lines the personal turmoil that accompanied the period covered by this dissertation.

I cannot stress enough that these characters are composites or thin representations of the people I knew, and in many cases, still communicate with today. Some of them have supported my family during hard times in ways that leave me forever in their debt. To the question of

¹⁶⁷ Bill Maurer, “Fact and Fetish in Creolization Studies: Herskovits and the Problem of Induction, or, Guinea Coast, 1593,” *New West Indian Guide* 1, no. 2 (2002): 5–22.

whether I am representing my own impressions in good faith, I can only say that I have had the best intentions, though I do worry that I will have misfired. I apologize in advance to everyone who has contributed to the mix that I made of my memory in which they feature as characters who cannot speak for themselves. I hope that I have captured at least the spirit of what occurred, and that I have blurred defining characteristics (using pseudonyms, of course) without entirely distorting what mattered. The ethnography on which I base my deliberations is already a text that became narrative long before I began this synthesis. My collection of everyday narratives, often in dialogic form, reflect impressions that might not be the same today, yet capture nonetheless a sense of being there that brought conviction to my prose. I cannot promise that my memory will coincide with those of others who were there. There are also the editorial problems of scope and space that are intrinsic to any ethnography. The criteria of selection and stage direction uses certain fragments to frame a theoretical argument, though my account of the event could have gone in many other directions.

Both migration and ethnography are arbitrage: moral and instrumental, observant and participatory, critical and complicit. The generalizations of the past and the fantasies of the future have the force of truth as we make our way across the river, but they only help us if we can recognize the particular situation as an instance of our knowledge. “As soon as we let go of the universal as a self-fulfilling abstract truth, we must become embroiled in specific situations,” writes Ana Tsing. “And thus it is necessary to begin again, and again, in the middle of things.”¹⁶⁸ This is the *salto mortale* at its most existential. Soren Kierkegaard called these moments when we act with full consciousness of our own uncertainty the “teleological suspension of the

¹⁶⁸ Ana Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 1–2.

ethical.”¹⁶⁹ Without teleology, we know that our explanations are a matter of belief. Without belief, we must have faith that whatever we do will be good enough. With history and context suspended, we must take responsibility for the indeterminate future of our intentions. At the middle of the river, the water cannot be distinguished from the rocks, but still, we make our way. With knowing practice and some luck, we get to the other side and a story gets told or a book gets written. New intentions are based on perceptions of the outcome. Nevertheless, just as volatility is a reality that models cannot capture, no ritual can eliminate our powerlessness before the onslaught of the unexpected. Some of us cope by building community; others divest from extended networks to cultivate a subjectivity of personal accumulation. Yet another option is to be less determinate in one’s expectations. As familiar as a *habitus* may be, in time an event will change everything.

Chapter Overview

The argument of this dissertation is also its method. This is not a unique claim, at least among anthropologists who have abandoned the positivism of traditional social science. No longer masters of the monograph, which captured the totality of an alien world that never existed in the first place, ethnographers have gone back to basics in order to create new theory. We have tested our philosophies using the tools of sociology, politics, economics, law, history, science, literature—indeed, any form of knowledge—to build imaginative hybrids on the foundation of our trademark method. With our commitment to the irreducible complexity of lived experience, however, we are also acutely aware of the blind spots created by any analytical framework in the

¹⁶⁹ Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, trans. H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 54–67.

interpretation of phenomena. Unlike other social sciences, which mobilize empirical findings to support hypotheses, anthropology derives the hypothesis from observation. The argument emerges gradually in dialectical tension with the presuppositions that the observer brings to experience. As William James puts it, “we live on speculative investments ... but living in posse is as good as living in the actual, so long as our credit remains good.”¹⁷⁰

My creditworthiness came into doubt during my fieldwork. Did my informants experience greater economic hardship in Africa or America? Did they identify themselves as self-interested individuals or communal individuals? Did they sustain pre-migration political commitments or cultivate new ones? I witnessed performances of nationality, personhood, and ritual to suggest any of these alternatives. The answers were an effect of my questions. My fieldnotes contain ample illustrations for the socio-historical explanations that were coming together through my scholarly research. Yet they also have a textual integrity of their own. Marilyn Strathern has described this problem of ethnographic writing as a double location. “Far from being a derivative or residual activity, as one might think of a report or of reportage, ethnographic writing creates a second field.”¹⁷¹ Here, Strathern activates the core insight of semiotics that all signs both represent and constitute their object.¹⁷² “The ethnographic moment” is a sign—an image, a phrase, a moment that “dazzles”—discovered in one’s fieldnotes that

¹⁷⁰ William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (New York: Longman Green, 2012), 88.

¹⁷¹ Marilyn Strathern, *Property, Substance and Effect: Anthropological Essays on Persons and Things* (London and New Brunswick, NJ: Athlone Press, 1999), 2.

¹⁷² Strathern, 6. In Peircian semiotics, any interaction can be expressed as a triadic relation among sign, object, and interpretant, which is defined by Paul Kockleman as “that component of a third which relates to an object in a way that corresponds with the way a sign relates to the object.” The interpretant is an effect of the sign, a contingency that becomes necessary, as part of the context of the sign-object relation. It relates to the relation between the terms of any opposition, changing that relation in the process. Strathern’s “ethnographic moment” is one such interpretant. See Charles Sanders Peirce, “What Is a Sign?” in *The Essential Peirce, Vol. 2: Selected Philosophical Writings, 1893-1913* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 4–10; and Paul Kockleman, “The Semiotic Stance,” *Semiotica* 157, nos. 1-4 (2005): 233–304.

relates what was analyzed at the moment of observation to what was observed at the moment of analysis. “It is a moment of immersement that is simultaneously total and partial, a totalising activity which is not the only activity in which the person is engaged.”¹⁷³ That other activity is the production of a narrative that weaves together these moments of “special knowledge” from another viewpoint, “not just as a view on it but from a new point of entirety or holism.”¹⁷⁴ Thus, the ethnographer is both totalized and totalizing in the effort to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange.

This dissertation combines three genres of writing in an attempt to derive value from such ethnographic moments. While still in the field, I began writing thick description and dialogue that had the drama of fiction but fit awkwardly within an expository frame. In writing, I have arbitrated the disconnect between two genres—one that describes patterns that connect the details and one that generalizes through abstraction—with theoretical work that introduces other infelicities of scope and scale. My expansive research design and lack of disciplinary restraint, while partly a matter of temperament, are also the expression of an uncertain field that would not be framed and my own struggles with the limits of knowledge. The more I observed, the more I had to figure out, and the more I figured out the more I observed what could not be figured out. I was not alone in this scramble to know. When Claude was not driving for Uber, he was glued to his computer screen devouring news reports from foreign sources that he believed were more credible than media produced in the U.S. In *The Anthropology of Time*, Alfred Gell uses Godel’s incompleteness theorem to argue, against Bourdieu, that practical knowledge logically entails the emergence of conceptual thought.¹⁷⁵ This is because self-reference generates a contradiction that

¹⁷³ Strathern, *Property, Substance and Effect*, 1.

¹⁷⁴ Strathern, 21.

¹⁷⁵ Alfred Gell, *The Anthropology of Time* (Oxford, UK: Berg, 1992), 283.

forces a shift to a higher order of abstraction. Take, for example, a Lumongo proverbial greeting, or *losako*: “my heart is a covered basket.” Like the famous “liar’s paradox,” the truth of this statement is in its ambiguity. The recipient of this statement might respond by asking others about the speaker’s well-being, thereby skipping to a higher scale of inquiry. In the Western tradition, the paradox of self-reference is expressed by the liar’s paradox. Articulated or implied, “I am lying” is the meaningless statement that drives the search for meaning. In my ethnography, inconsistencies between speech and behavior or facile answers to complex questions encouraged infinite research. While more reading furnished critique, more ethnography eliminated my separation from the field, ambiguing my opinionated standpoint. Once I ended my fieldwork, this infinite regress of self-reference acquired new force as the impossible actuality of the ethnography itself.

In the first chapter, I clarify that I mean by “impossibility” the counter-performativity of arbitrage, a creative practice that eliminates its own conditions of possibility. Even qualitative data requires a model that distinguishes the message from the noise by framing findings as distinct from inventions. Using scenes from my fieldnotes, I illustrate a series of opposing models derived from Ferdinand Tönnies’s seminal distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* that have represented separate conceptual genealogies for over a century, yet logically entail each other in a dialectical relation that shapes the lives of my informants. Each of these ideas—community and network, integration and diversity, and gift and commodity—are two-sided “real abstractions”: heuristics describing an empirical reality, on one hand, and objects performing as part of that reality, on the other. The assumptions that a community sustains itself, a diaspora will integrate, and a gift will be returned sets a different political stage than the assumptions that networks will expand, diversity is irreducible, and commodities are worth their

price. The common-sense ubiquity of these models in policy and practice obscures these conceptual underpinnings, enhancing their efficacy. Indeed, they were the abductive grounds of knowing practice with which I improvised the field methods described at the start of the chapter. Yet it is only in the writing that the discovery of these patterns takes form retrospectively as an analysis with historical depth and a politics of action.

What knowing practices cope best with ruptures in the near future of everyday life? The second chapter addresses this question with respect to the racially and xenophobically-coded enforcement of law following the 2008 Recession. First, I discuss a grassroots legislative campaign against a policy threatening the livelihood of hair braiders in Illinois. Gendered tensions enhanced relations of “network security” among African women, who circulated material, intellectual, and affective resources under conditions of growing socioeconomic stress. I show how this campaign simultaneously challenged and participated in the politics of austerity, a global battery of laws and governance practices that have shifted the burden of risk from a state that guarantees the well-being of its citizens to a population that guarantees the liquidity of the dollar. Organizers activated a collective event that was politically successful; however, the expected dividends of human capital had a realization problem in the post-recession economy. I explore why this was so by analyzing the roots of the foreclosure crisis in the history of predatory finance targeting African Americans in Chicago. Next, I illustrate through my ethnography how this racial politics of exception continues to criminalize black men and boys. I relate this narrative to a biopolitics of double securitization in which law enforcement generates optimal conditions for the securitization of mortgage and bond markets. This chapter ends by reflecting on how crisis affects expectations that sustain the order of the gift. When trust fails, the

counter-performative arbitrage of new relations may create precarious grounds for other options to appear.

In the third chapter, memories of exile from civil war are a prism for reflecting on the distinction between ethics and morality as an intertemporal problem of justice. I investigate the relation of a “life” to a “history” in a narrative that I have assembled from a series of interviews with a friend from the DRC. Anecdotes from his formative years during the Mobutu regime are recounted alongside the proverbial greetings that he learned as a child. Taking these disparate sources together highlights the ambivalence of perspective, personhood, and judgment that comes to the surface of everyday life when skepticism is a survival skill. In another encounter, Claude’s Lomongo colingual Sylvie reenacts her refugee testimony, interpreting her admission to the U.S. as evidence of God’s grace. Whereas Claude’s story emerges as a dialogue, Sylvie’s narrative is the repetition of a speech act that metapragmatically legitimated the law and arbitrated a border. Her account of experiences since that time, however, introduce a note of mimicry into her story’s denouement. Next, I take a step back to reflect on African history as the “black mirror” of Western progress, unfolding a meta-narrative of my own that describes how structural adjustment converted sovereign debt into financial assets following the Volcker Shock of 1979. The last part of the chapter explores themes of subjectivity, mimesis, and trauma with respect to another pair of informants, cousins from Côte d’Ivoire who are skilled at finding opportunity in crisis. Even under conditions of civil war, arbitrageurs of the self, like the transgender Narcisse, are turning the modernization narrative inside out, converting Africa from its position of exception into just another landscape of risk. I emphasize, however, that the people featured in this chapter resist characterizations, such as Afropolitan aesthetics or

Afropessimist trauma, because their ethical commitments sustain an ambivalent faith in the present.

The fourth chapter demonstrates how migrants bear the risk of national sovereignty. I do this by approaching the liminal relation of the noncitizen to the law as a means of securitization for the financial state. Like national currency, I argue, citizenship is an asset that is commensurate with differences within national boundaries and arbitrages the value inequalities between them. The representation of Ebola as a crime is a point of departure for interrogating the legal standard of “good moral character” as an expression of sovereign discretion in immigration law. Thick descriptions of my informants’ encounters with immigration law through family-based petitions, asylum claims, cancellation of removal, and the Diversity Immigrant Visa Program (or diversity visa lottery) illustrate the dynamics of executive privilege under the Plenary Power Doctrine, which exempts admission or expulsion of noncitizens from judicial review. With the concept of “mere” or “bare” life in the work of Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin, and Giorgio Agamben, I consider how DNA testing and bodily scars—such as female genital cutting (FGC) and mutilation from abuse—operate as signs that link the temporal specificity of narrative to the categorical imperatives of law. The ideal of “the deserving migrant” is impossible, I argue, because the determination of value is always ambivalent in a human rights regime that maintains a distinction between passive victim and economic agent as a universal rationale for admission to the *polis*. Indeed, this problem may be intrinsic to citizenship as well within the financialized state. In the last section of the chapter, I examine this possibility in a civil tort case that is converted into a criminal case with immigration-related overtones, blurring the separation of powers that formally distinguishes the immigrant from the citizen.

Perhaps it is not the migrant but the law of the liminal state that is parasitic: contingent, infectious, and opportunistic.

The fifth chapter tackles the Great Recession head-on as an event that impacted work and livelihood. In the United States, where the state has largely privatized the business of social reproduction, any worker without assets is exposed to the generalized precarity of work, whatever their class origins or education. My informants were familiar with this scenario in Africa, where good connections cannot compensate for limited capital. The U.S. was supposed to be different. I explore the fallout of the crisis through three case studies juxtaposing different configurations of portfolio and opportunity cost. The dissonance of this financial language in the context of economic struggle mirrors the absurdity of these stories. A factory worker from Brazzaville, a Senegalese *femme d'affairs*, and an informational technology specialist from Côte d'Ivoire practice their knowledge in particular ways when their employment deteriorates. The differential outcomes of their efforts dramatize their relative positions within a global economy in transition, a proposition that I support by explaining the changing role of finance—in the U.S. and globally—since the end of the postwar boom in the 1970s. When risk-bearers are at the front lines of credit expansion and contraction, they may learn to hedge their current position by expanding their options. They become risk-takers, leveraging their possessions, their talents, and even their affect as an asset in the information economy. We learn to capitalize on precarity whenever possible by transforming deficits into surplus through arbitrage.

These chapters illustrate how knowing practices of speculation—with respect to thought, politics, history, law, and work—emerge from the systematic surrender of social wealth to financial markets. Having made an uncertain bid for a more secure future, my informants had arbitrage in common. African migrants in Chicago are not unique in this respect. The challenges

that they faced during my six years of fieldwork manifested trends that affect us all. In my conclusion, I summarize these trends as the cross-cutting themes that have oriented my inquiry: 1) financialization as arbitrage; 2) the double securitization of derivatives and police; 3) the limits of human rights; 4) the trauma trap of history in the future tense; and 5) the network security of knowing practice. This dissertation, like the narratives of my informants, has both represented and enacted a model that seeks to make sense of inexplicable events. Storytelling and analysis are powerful tools for coping with change because they make the strange familiar by instantiating a new normal. Yet the diagnosis of crisis cannot restore order when it is a chronic disease, something broken that can't be fixed. Indeed, problem-solving can exacerbate the problem because it performs its own objective by repressing counter-performativity. Outcomes are never as predictable as they appear in retrospect, even under the constraints of the controlled experiment or the surveillance state. Solutions belong to the new past, after the ethical moment has passed, which is why emergent norms of conduct appear self-evident in a universe of moral ambiguity. Radical events may change everything, but that change is experienced as a way of being that was there all along. It is this thought that led me to wonder if the arbitrage practices of predatory finance might also, paradoxically, offer a way to think about justice under circumstances of existential threat.

CHAPTER 1

Finding the African in America:

The Impossible Actuality of Ethnographic Method

I had found my Africa in America. I could compete with some people, could imitate others, and had a chance to excel.

—Manthia Diawara, *We Won't Budge*, 2003

The study of the concrete, which is the study of the whole, is made more readily, is more interesting and furnishes more explanations in the sphere of sociology than the study of the abstract.

—Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*, 1925

“Thanksgiving is the day of the immigrant, isn't it?” said Marième, who owned a Senegalese restaurant with her husband Khalifa. “So today we pretend we're in Africa.”

She explained that she had decided to have a Thanksgiving party so that she would not sink into sadness. Khalifa was a Mouride and had just departed for the Grand Magal in Touba, leaving the rest of the family behind.¹ He was bearing gifts carefully assembled for family, whom she had not seen since her youngest daughter was born three years earlier. Marième identified with another Sufi brotherhood, the Layene, and expressed some frustration with the fact that Khalifa's annual contribution to his marabout could pay the airfare to Dakar for her three children and herself. Yet she respected his piety, sharing his conviction that it was at least

¹ The Grand Magal is the annual religious pilgrimage of the Mouride Brotherhood, one of the four Sufi orders (*tariqa*) in Senegal. It takes place on the eighteenth of Safar, the second month of the Islamic calendar, in the holy city of Touba, which was founded in 1887 by the spiritual leader of the movement, Shaikh Amadou Bamba Mbakke. The centrality of international trade to the organization and wealth of the brotherhood has increased the significance of the Grand Magal as an opportunity for adherents to demonstrate their commitment to their marabout or *shaykh*, network with each other, and build influence within their communities of origin. Over 3 million pilgrims are reported to have attended the event in recent years.

to some degree responsible for the success of their business in Chicago. Besides, his absence allowed her to dedicate greater attention to her surrogate sisters, bound by circumstance if not by blood, such as Bintu, the honoree of the evening's event.

Bintu had been working in their kitchen for the last three years, ever since her husband lost his job at a parking garage downtown. The misfortunes continued in quick succession: her husband couldn't find steady work, they defaulted on their mortgage, and her mother in Senegal was diagnosed with cancer. Then she was reported to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) after a routine traffic stop and put into deportation proceedings. So many reasons to leave, few reasons to stay. Still relatively young, they had their health. They were planning to open a restaurant in Bintu's hometown of Saint Louis, in northwest Senegal. "May God smile upon them, *inshallah*," murmured Marième.

That evening, stately traditional boubous of *mbaseñ riche* and voile lace were interspersed with form-fitting mermaid gowns. A friend of Amina's friend Nadine, Lefe, was wearing a sequined polyester dress that showed more skin than the others. She was from Congo-Brazzaville and didn't get the griot's Wolof jokes. "If you don't dance for the next number, your sex will dry up and fly away!" Nadine translated for her. They jumped to their feet, laughing.

"Look at how she dances!" Amina's sister Fatou said into my ear. I probably would not have noticed, but it was true that Lefe swung her hips lower to the ground and held her arms closer to her body. "Let's see what you can do!" As the dancers pressed in with their teasing and laughter, stuffing dollar bills into Bintu's dress, Amina stood up, slipped some dollar bills into my hand and pulled me into the throng.

From my outsider position, the *sabaar* appeared to enact the ideal of community as "collective effervescence," Emile Durkheim's term for the affective discharge of solidarity that

instantiates the group.² Yet Durkheim's notion of society as a bounded organism did not fit the random relations assembled here. Who was invited to Bintu's party, and how might their sociality be best understood? Did they represent a community reproducing itself through ritual performance? Or were they a network of persons converging at an event from a multiplicity of positions?

These questions summon a formative opposition in social theory, implying different units of analysis and conceptions of society. This opposition has historical roots in a single influential model: Ferdinand Tönnies's distinction between community and society. Like other social scientists of his time, Tönnies sought to adapt the techniques of the natural sciences to social phenomena by reducing its complexity to a limited number of basic concepts.³ Accordingly, the *Gemeinschaft* of traditional community was characterized by organic cohesion, shared values, and kinship, whereas the *Gesellschaft* of modern society was characterized by voluntary relations among heterogeneous individuals under emergent conditions of social fragmentation and alienation. Tönnies' conceived of the community as a product of nature and society as an artifact of human will, a categorical distinction that many anthropologists found objectionable. Nevertheless, they relied on the form of Tönnies's distinction to sustain the "deliberate fiction" of lifeworlds outside global processes of commodification, communications technology, and migration.⁴

² Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995), 207–41.

³ See Louis Wirth, "The Sociology of Ferdinand Tönnies," *American Journal of Sociology* 32, no. 3 (1926): 412–22.

⁴ On analytical form as deliberate fiction, see Marilyn Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 9.

Today, people everywhere participate in the variegated global networks that were conceptually identified with society. Looking back, the formative distinction between tradition and modernity as a frontier in time and space appears anachronistic. Anthropologists and historians emphasize both the fluidity of social processes and the structuring effects of capitalist institutions during and even before the colonial period. From a contemporary standpoint, the bounded communities of classic ethnography are the idealized representations of a Eurocentric worldview. Yet as Weber pointed out, the replacement of one heuristic for another does not eliminate its artificiality.⁵ A model is artificial by definition, an explanatory mechanism that generates its own conditions for explanation. There is a politics to the scientific method, however rigorous, that many anthropologists have rejected, preferring to engage with their informants on their own terms. Nevertheless, an appreciation for complexity is uncertain epistemological ground on which to stand.

For both Durkheim and Weber, the rationality of *Gesellschaft* ensured the scientific validity of social science by preserving the distinction between the subject and object of observation.⁶ The positivist Durkheim was convinced that empirical data are social facts that can

⁵ Max Weber, "Objectivity of Social Science and Social Policy," in *Methodology of the Social Sciences*, trans. E.A. Schils and H.A. Finch (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1949), 50–112.

⁶ Durkheim and Weber represent two opposing strains of neo-Kantian thought, which sought to transform the "transcendental deduction"—the inaccessibility of reality to consciousness—into a scientific method. Key to this project was the rejection of "psychologism" by sustaining the distinction between objective fact and subjective value. While all scientific judgement is inflected by the values of the scientist, "Marburg School" philosophers, following Hermann Cohen and Paul Natorp, argued that knowledge of the objective world is possible through the identification of valid facts and the investigation of conditions that make that fact possible. They prioritized validity over values, a methodological commitment that is taken up by Durkheim. The "Heidelberg School," founded by Wilhelm Windelband and Heinrich Rickert, took the inverse approach, prioritizing values over validity by claiming that the prescriptive force of the judgment confers validity on what we call truth. Weber explicates this position: "The objective validity of all empirical knowledge rests exclusively upon the ordering of the given reality according to categories which are subjective in a specific sense, namely, in that they present the presuppositions of our knowledge and are based on the presupposition of the value of those truths which empirical knowledge alone is able to give us." Weber, 110. For a thorough analysis of these opposing neo-Kantianisms and their

be differentiated logically from statements of value. As he wrote in his 1895 *Rules of Sociological Method*:

Social phenomena must be considered in themselves, detached from the conscious beings who form their own mental representations of them. They must be studied from the outside, as external things, because it is in this guise that they present themselves to us.⁷

Extrapolated from collective experience, Durkheim's models were assumed to exist *in reality*. Weber, on the other hand, located the model of reality—what he called “ideal types”—in the consciousness of the observer. Weber's hermeneutic tradition treats evidence with skepticism. Facts cannot be value-neutral because they are identified and analyzed by a “one-sided” observer who organizes a “chaos of existential judgments” into meaningful accounts of social phenomena.⁸ Nevertheless, critical judgement may be trained to meet disciplinary standards of objectivity. Thus, even without empirical certainty, the boundary between observer and observed is preserved.

According to this methodological convention, “participant observation” is a contradictory term. How can an ethnographer observe “ways of life” without participating in them? What is the status of knowledge that is simultaneously subjective and objective? And what are the ethical implications of treating ethnographic subjects as objects of inquiry? The reciprocal scrutiny of informants led many classical ethnographers to examine the foundations of their own rationality. While E. E. Evans-Pritchard shared Durkheim's belief in social facts, he could not fully disentangle them from the “mental representations” of his Azande informants. Differences between modes of thought lay not in their logic, he found, but in their presuppositions—the

influence on twentieth-century social theory, see Gillian Rose, “The Antinomies of Sociological Reason,” in *Hegel Contra Sociology* (London: Athlone Press, 1981).

⁷ Émile Durkheim, *Rules of Sociological Method*, trans. W. D. Halls (New York: Free Press, 1982), 70.

⁸ Weber, “Objectivity of Social Science,” 78.

belief systems that motivated the interpretation of objects and events as facts.⁹ While Franz Boas shared Weber's methodological individualism—a commitment to the explanatory power of intention—he rejected Weber's meta-historical schema of rationalization, asserting that “it is impossible to determine *a priori* those parts of our mental life that are common to mankind as a whole and those due to the culture in which we live.”¹⁰ Claude Levi-Strauss disagreed. Drawing on both Durkheim and Boas, he applied the tools of structural linguistics to the “wild thought” of myth in order to distinguish cultural content from universal forms of human cognition.¹¹

Each of these anthropologists expressed respect for perspectives different from their own. Yet they stabilized the relativizing effects of cross-cultural fieldwork by preserving the distinction between the subjects of a community being observed, what some called an “emic” perspective, and the professional subjects doing the observing, the “etic” perspective.¹² Adherence to this convention prevented any agnosticism with respect to scientific rationality from undermining the epistemological foundations of the discipline. Yet it was sustainable only as long as the subjects of ethnographic inquiry remained separate from the ethnographer's frame of reference. As Webb Keane points out, both Durkheim and Weber were able to sustain their subjective objectivity only by bracketing contingencies that could not be explained by their models.¹³ While Durkheim excluded individual intention in favor of aggregate phenomena,

⁹ E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1976).

¹⁰ Franz Boas, “The Aims of Ethnology,” in *Race, Language and Culture* (New York: MacMillan, 1940), 636.

¹¹ Claude Levi-Strauss, *Wild Thought*, trans. J. Mehlman and J. Leavitt (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).

¹² Marvin Harris, “History and Significance of the Emic/Etic Distinction,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 5 (1976): 329–50.

¹³ Webb Keane, “Semiotics and the Social Analysis of Material Things,” *Language and Communication* 23 (2003): 411.

Weber excluded aggregate phenomena in favor of individual intention. Both treated unexpected events, such as natural disasters, as an externality beyond society. This “semiotic ideology” sustained the divide between nature and culture as a foundation that allowed the social scientist to treat a particular culture as nature without contaminating the sample with a culture of their own.

This epistemological arrangement collapsed when planetary capitalism flooded the natural laboratory of “primitive society” like a natural disaster. During the last quarter of the twentieth century, the objective distinction between *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft* steadily dissolved, and with it, the subjective distinction between ethnographer and informant. As observers observing observers—and being observed in turn—anthropologists refuted the possibility of a neutral methodology adequate to the complexity and multiplicity of ethnographic encounters. Challenging both Durkheim’s and Weber’s claims to scientific validity, they sought to revalidate ethnography by turning ethnographic attention to their own methods. Amidst calls to decolonize the discipline, they interrogated unequal relations in the field and found themselves in a hall of mirrors that reflected their own fantasies about “cultural others.”¹⁴ Scientific models lost their function as an “Archimedean point” that organized information by disavowing the entanglements of lived experience. Without a standpoint distinguishing modern from non-modern, fact from fiction, message from noise, the architectural framework supporting the

¹⁴ Critical writing that challenged the presuppositions of classic anthropology, even before “the reflexive turn,” include Vine Deloria, Jr., *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (New York: MacMillan, 1969); William S. Willis, Jr., “Skeletons in the Anthropological Closet,” in *Reinventing Anthropology*, ed. Dell Hymes (New York: Random House, 1972); and Talal Asad, *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (London: Ithaca Press, 1973).

analytical enterprise fractured into assemblages of practices, persons, and things enacting transient matters of concern.¹⁵

Insofar as methodology is a technique for creating objectively valid knowledge, ethnography discovered itself as an impossible method. How can the general experience of ethnographic subjects be described from the particular standpoint of an ethnographer? How can the particular experience of an ethnographic subject constitute a general standpoint at all? Yet to say that ethnographic method is impossible is merely to state the contradiction between particularity and generality, identified long ago by David Hume as “the problem of induction.”¹⁶ How can we derive understanding from a mere collection of observations? Pragmatically speaking, modern science has refuted Hume’s deduction that such inferences cannot be logically justified. Yet the problem remains. In recent years, the perennial philosophical debate over the truth value of the fact has erupted in political struggles powered by conspiracy theories, xenophobia, and denial. The internet is a medium through which participants observe themselves and each other, generalizing the ethnographer’s problem: How do we decide that a statement is true? According to the logic of deduction, the general concept both constitutes and opposes the experience that escapes it. According to the logic of induction, the particular social fact both constitutes and opposes the general concept that defines it. Anthropology confronts this problem in both method and content, making inferences from observations of others observing and drawing inferences from experience. In its self-reflection, anthropological theory shifted from

¹⁵ See Aihwa Ong and Stephen J. Collier, eds., *Global Assemblages: Technology, Politics, and Ethics as Anthropological Problems* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2005).

¹⁶ Cambridge philosopher C. D. Broad famously called induction “the glory of science and the scandal of philosophy.” See Ian Hacking, *The Emergence of Probability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

“knowing the other” to knowing otherness *per se*. In other words, anthropology became preoccupied with knowing what cannot be known.

Rather than deconstruct the discipline out of existence, as some feared, this epistemological crisis has forced anthropologists to own their philosophy. “Self-reflexive desperation about the foundation of our (whose?) knowledge is no longer required,” observed Annamarie Mol in her 2002 ethnography of medical practice in a Dutch hospital. “We would be wiser to spend our energy on trying to come to grips with what we are doing when crafting academic knowledge.”¹⁷ What was I doing at Bintu’s *sabaar*? Joining the circle of dancers, I was playing the part of the outsider within, altering the dynamics I sought to understand by virtue of my presence. In my writing, I describe relations that are simultaneously exceptional and stereotypical, full of surprises that make sense. Through participation and observation, the practice of ethnography performs the contradiction it seeks to resolve. This is a speculative practice, not because it lacks evidence but because it consciously participates in the production and validation of social facts that could be otherwise, making real a possible world.

So, what is the status of ethnographic knowledge? Drawing an analogy between her ethnographic practice and that of her collaborators, the practitioners of Chinese Medicine, Judith Farquhar emphasizes the pragmatic materiality of speculation in diagnosis and care:

The reading, interpreting, classifying, and making actionable of the signs or *xiang* of illness is a practical problem, one that often faces the clinician in the quasi-chaos of a particular human life. Each of us is an unstable and contingent gathering among the myriad things.¹⁸

¹⁷ Annamarie Mol, “Doing Theory,” in *The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 158.

¹⁸ Farquhar, *A Way of Life: Things, Thought, and Action in Chinese Medicine* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020), 67.

A model is at work here in the dynamic fusion of theory and intuition, convention and situation, expectation and expertise. It is a model that emerges through “knowing practice,” transforming patterns of disorder and scattered fieldnotes into accounts with provisional coherence.¹⁹ Yet even when models are developed as static representations that mirror their objects, they have efficacy by promoting a particular interpretation of events. Whether they are explicit or disavowed, models operate in the world as concrete abstractions, forms of thought that, along with the ethnographer herself, participate in the reality they describe.

In this chapter, I consider the performative efficacy of certain models that have informed my ethnography. Structural models, which begin by positing a collective social formation, provide an external position of observation from which to schematize dynamics of value and power. Process models, which begin with relations among particular agents, are sensitive to the contingency of events and the emergence of unexpected formations. While these approaches have historically opposed one another, they also constitute forms of “local knowledge” that come together in social practice.²⁰ For example, as they shape the study of international migration, models of transnationalism and integration perform as sociological common sense. They also give rise to counter-performative effects that undermine their analytical and normative truth value.

Like Farquhar, my approach to ethnography reflects the knowledge practices that I have observed among my collaborators. For new migrants in a strange place and for established migrants in a strange time of economic decline, making do with failed expectations produces

¹⁹ Judith Farquhar, “Knowledge in Translation: Global Science, Local Things,” in *Medicine and the Politics of Knowledge*, ed. Susan Levine (Cape Town: Human Sciences Research Council Press, 2013), 153–70.

²⁰ Clifford Geertz, “Local Knowledge: Fact and Law in Comparative Perspective,” in *Local Knowledge* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

speculative solidarities that form scattered communities across boundaries of difference. Likewise, my ethnography brings together incomplete stories and multiple forms of analysis in a way that cannot fully cohere. We are all participant observers and observing participants who enact the processes in which we are embedded. This is why, rather than describe a method that frames empirical data according to certain theoretical assertions, I illustrate that framing through an arrangement of perceptions and explanations that performs ethnography as arbitrage.

Making Models

This dissertation would not have been possible without Amina and Claude. They are its central protagonists, and over years of mutual hardship, they counted among my closest friends. Amina grew up in Dakar at the center of a combative marriage between schoolteachers, one Wolof and one Bambara. Claude, born in a Mongo village in the Equateur province of the DRC, left home to attend a Catholic boarding school just as it was being reorganized under Mobutu Sese Seko's policy of *authenticité*. They were different in many ways, and their paths had never crossed before I introduced them, yet they had common contacts. Amina and Claude shared the capacity to translate and generalize experiential knowledge into a form of collateral that supported the projects of others, at times to their own detriment.²¹ They both had postsecondary education and were skilled advocates with immigration, law enforcement and criminal justice systems, social service agencies, and state government. They also frequently brokered disputes and agreements among people in their networks. These services were generally offered informally and were rarely paid for, at least in monetary terms. When relationships fractured,

²¹ On the historical ambivalence of collateral as asset and as pledge, see Nina Boy and Daniela Gabor, "Collateral Times," *Economy and Society* 48, no. 3 (2019): 295–314.

Amina and Claude adapted by reactivating old connections and exploring new ones. They denied that these networking practices were instrumental, whatever benefits they might deliver.

Interdependence was simply “the African way,” the first principle of an ethical life.

It was thanks to Amina and Claude that, unlike studies of migration that take national origin as a natural unit of inquiry, this ethnography is concerned with people who have difference in common. This was the first “model” to emerge from my preliminary fieldwork. Certainly, people described their allegiance to one another in terms of kinship, ethnicity, and geography, and many intimacies continued or were associated with relations in Africa. Yet many of the connections among Africans that I encountered in the U.S. were also accidental encounters that were later interpreted as membership, even kinship, within a common community. Chicago’s “African Community” was a lived idea that gathered around people like Amina and Claude as they moved throughout the city and suburbs, attracting both confidence and competition. Over six years, the scope of my research expanded to include their intimates, extended relatives, and casual associates from twelve countries, all located throughout the United States and Africa, as well as Europe, Canada, and China.²² Their networks ramified, with varying degrees of trust and obligation and through orchestrated events and random circumstances, over international borders and across differences of ethnicity, nationality, socioeconomic status, and gender, incorporating strangers like myself.²³ I observed some of the relationships at a distance

²² Between 2010 and 2016, I communicated with approximately 175 individuals from Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Côte d’Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, the Republic of Congo, Senegal, and Togo. This includes individuals with whom I have had one or more personal encounters; it does not include passing contacts during participant observation. See appendix for a breakdown of my ethnographic data.

²³ Over the course of my fieldwork, I relied on four primary sources of ethnographic data. Most importantly, I engaged in face-to-face communications in both private and group settings. Second, I supported informants through eight legal proceedings, in both immigration and criminal justice settings, sometimes using my experience with immigrant and civil rights groups in Chicago to advocate on their

and participated in others through everyday interactions and long-distance communications via telephone, text, and social media.

Like Amina and Claude, most of my primary informants were my contemporaries. That we shared historical referents became another model directing my fieldwork: the disappointments of Cold War development policy and the devastating impact of the neoliberal turn became a “tag” for details that I recorded and a theme in conversations that I initiated. The daughter of an anthropologist, I had lived in rural Guatemala at the height of U.S. neo-imperial aggression in the midst of a “dirty war” that we only became aware of later. This personal history motivated my longstanding interest in international migration. As a graduate student with teenagers, I also had something in common with women and men in their forties and fifties who were raising children under severe financial constraints. These points of resonance generated “patterns that connect” despite our structurally divergent positions.²⁴ On the other hand, the disparities in those positions could be significant. Though many of my contacts had received professional training and some had found positions fitting their qualifications, most of them culled together an erratic income from a variety of sources, from freelance consultancies and international trading to hair braiding and taxi driving.²⁵ Those who had not completed secondary

behalf. Third, I attended social events, including “hometown” and ethnic associations, Pan-African meetings, religious services, and family celebrations. Finally, I reviewed and monitored a variety of African and diaspora print and electronic media, with a particular emphasis on diaspora websites, blogs, and videos of all kinds. Because relations among my informants intersect and congeal in unexpected ways, I utilized “network mapping” techniques, identifying institutions, locations, individuals, and events that recur within spatio-temporal patterns of association. I have also employed the extended case method, gathering seventeen detailed case histories of experiences before, during, and after migration. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in English and French, with a focus on institutional encounters, remunerative activities, the nature of local and long-distance relationships, and the extent of their associated obligations.

²⁴ See Gregory Bateson, *Mind and Nature* (New York: Dutton, 1979).

²⁵ According to the 2015 Census, 39 percent of sub-Saharan Africans ages twenty-five and over had a bachelor’s degree or higher, compared to 29 percent of the total foreign-born population and 31 percent of the U.S.-born population.

school faced literacy challenges, though many were proficient in multiple spoken languages, including English. In certain neighborhoods or outside the city, my informants would have to cope with the uneasy threat of racial suspicion or xenophobia.

A third research model was “engaged ethnography” through advocacy in a range of bureaucratic processes. Like Amina and Claude, I helped people with logistics. I translated for lawyers, doctors, and public officials; visited hospitals, schools, banks, and prisons; showed up at courtrooms, offices, and airports; and surfed websites. Mostly, however, they sought me out for immigration advice. Though I had experience in the field, I am not a lawyer and was quick to tell them so. Nevertheless, I could fill out forms, provide referrals, and translate stories. Some were applying for residency in the United States on the basis of a family-based petition and needed to demonstrate that they would not become a public charge. Others were claiming asylum or had arrived as refugees and were applying for citizenship. Many others had overstayed nonimmigrant visas and were hoping to adjust their status somehow. As with other immigrant groups, poorer, less-educated individuals were more likely to live without a visa or work authorization. Though they were my most precarious informants, they were less likely to ask for assistance. Because they made so few demands, they managed to find work even during the worst days of the recession. Their compromised position in the United States was no indication of their relative importance to families in Africa. For the price of exile, their remittances bought food, property, education, and a certain status that came with distance abroad.

Each of these three heuristics—patterns that connect, shared historical referents, and advocacy—revealed limits of ethnographic knowledge. As Jean and John Comaroff put it, my ethnography was on an awkward scale not only because I was abstracting from my informants’

concrete experiences, but also because their abstractions were my concrete experience.²⁶ Once the mutual curiosity of common difference wore thin, we were as different as we were the same. I began to notice that conversations about history and politics rehearsed old positions that obscured more than they revealed. Acquaintances and casual friends interacted with an almost extravagant politeness, and it was often hard to tell what they really thought. Sometimes there were personal conflicts, but I rarely witnessed them. In fact, the more connected I became, the more disconnected and uninformed I felt.

“Don’t worry, we all feel that way,” Amina and Claude both reassured me. We became closer as we accumulated history together. Over time, I found that commitments throughout our web of relationships frequently involved gifts, loans, and investments. Was everyone talking about money because of the recession? My closest friends were forthcoming about their finances, and we fretted over foreclosures as frankly as we discussed parenthood and intimacies. Muslim, Protestant, and even Catholic religious services explicitly framed questions of faith and morality in financial terms. Charismatic preachers of the “prosperity gospel” promised worldly wealth in exchange for heavenly devotion. At the holy city of Touba during the *Magal* festival, my Mouride friends insisted that I contribute a significant cash payment to their *marabout*; my spiritual health depended on it.

Because we were all ailing financially, I began to study the mechanics of the 2008 crisis and its pervasive impact. I began making a new model that captured how the institutional demands of late capitalism translated into structured activities of understanding with which we managed patterns of disorder. According to this model, I noticed that affective attachments often

²⁶ Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, “Ethnography on an Awkward Scale: Postcolonial Anthropology and the Violence of Abstraction,” *Ethnography* 4, no. 2 (2003): 147–79.

translated into what a financial trader would call a “contingent claim”: a derivative with a payout that depends on the realization of some uncertain future event. Personal loans were derivative insofar as they derived value from the reputation of the creditor. By translating monetary wealth into “wealth in people,” leaders reinforced their standing within their networks while newcomers received the credit they needed to synchronize their worlds. I wondered about the ethics of these arbitrage opportunities.

During two six-week trips to Africa in late 2012 and early 2013, I observed the other side of this transnational circuit of credit and debt. The shift in setting turned my attention to the material imperatives and social expectations that sustain global migration, even when the outcomes are not satisfactory. In Dakar, new construction boomed and late model cars dodged patchwork taxicabs and donkey carts. Billboards advertised Orange (the French telecommunications company), Western Union, and DHL Worldwide Express. Huge Coca-Cola banners announced that there were a million reasons to believe in Africa, and Nescafé was a proud sponsor of the Touba *Magal*. Signs from the European Union identified the new road from the Senegal-Mali border to Bamako as a global investment; restaurants in Bamako were full of foreigners despite a recent coup that had deposed the country’s president. Amina’s Malian cousin had built a large house in a new subdivision from the proceeds of a successful business importing cars from overseas. Money was flowing, yet I witnessed a number of deals go bad, either because financing did not materialize or because inventory mysteriously failed to arrive. Property and business owners lived abroad or had close relatives that did. Construction workers shoveled gravel by hand, and most of the young people I met did not work regularly. Most of them asked me how to get to the United States.

I didn't know what to say. In fact, I could barely say anything because I couldn't speak Wolof.²⁷ I was the ethnographer of Amina's ethnography, as she translated what she heard in terms that were inflected by her own sense of displacement. Dakar had changed a great deal since her last visit eight years before. "I'm like a stranger in time," she remarked as she went about her business. She was as out of sync with the environment as she had been in New York when she first arrived in 1990. Our different experiences of alienation were entangled in a way that could not be clearly distinguished in my notes. As a beneficiary of "teranga," the Senegalese ethos of hospitality, I soon made connections beyond Amina's inner circle, yet lacked the monetary resources to express my gratitude in terms deemed appropriate for an American in Africa.²⁸ This problem of reciprocity haunted my fieldwork just as it shaped the lives of my informants on both sides of the Atlantic.

In writing, it has been difficult to subtract myself from my representations of "the field." This is not unusual for anthropologists. Yet this problem was exacerbated, perhaps, because my informants and I were similarly situated in space—literally neighbors on the South Side of Chicago—and time, our lives ruptured by the 2008 financial crisis. In an insightful meditation on the crisis and its effect on her position as an ethnographer, Annelise Riles describes her "paraethnographic" identification with Japanese financial traders as they questioned the excessive risk-taking that had been justified by their belief in self-correcting markets.²⁹ Their

²⁷ Paul Rabinow describes a similar situation in *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1977).

²⁸ "Teranga" is the Wolof word for hospitality, which is a point of pride among Senegalese.

²⁹ Annelise Riles, "Market Collaboration: Finance, Culture, and Ethnography after Neoliberalism," *American Anthropologist* 115, no. 4 (2013): 563. The term "para-ethnography" was introduced by Douglas Holmes and George Marcus to advocate research that engages the analytical categories of reflexive, highly-educated interlocutors. Douglas Holmes and George Marcus, "Collaboration Today and the Re-Imagination of the Classic Scene of Fieldwork Encounter," *Collaborative Anthropologies* 1, no. 1 (2008): 81–101.

loss of confidence in their own expertise inspired a reflexive critique of the culture of finance that placed them on common intellectual ground with the ethnographer, undermining the “value-added” of her contribution. Riles describes her own failure of expertise as an unexpected opportunity to renew anthropology’s methodological commitment to collaboration: “the transformation of social relations into analytical relations.” Her model of “collaboration” does not imply the co-production of theory so much as the mutual reformulation of problems when models fail. In the same way, my informants and I found ourselves in comparable situations during difficult years in which we seemed unable, despite our best intentions, to achieve reasonable results.

As our strategies faltered and we commiserated, speculated, and improvised on the next best steps, I learned a great deal about the limitations of my models. Inspired by the creativity with which my informants manage their everyday lives, I intended to present “just stories” in descriptive prose that recorded change in practices of historical accounting.³⁰ However, my African friends did not readily volunteer linear narratives. Mostly we parried informal banter full of details about the here and now, with glances backwards and forwards requiring some insider knowledge to understand. The life stories that I collected during recorded interviews had the formal coherence appropriate to the professional ritual of qualitative research. However, the “data” that I have found the most compelling are scraps of commentary that floated to the surface of conversations as tangled clusters of reflection, skewed by affect and conflated points of view. This brings me back to Farquhar and her attention to how fragments of lived experience—

³⁰ Lila Abu-Lughod, *Writing Women’s Worlds: Bedouin Stories* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993).

recollections, stories, and sensory images—motivate and frame our actions.³¹ I am not generalizing about francophone Africans on the basis of thick descriptions.³² Instead, I have attempted to channel my informants' contributions as a kind of collaboration, albeit one articulated from the contradictory position that is my own knowing practice. My narrative voice is speculative, warranted only by the wager that our struggles to support one another express a truth about our collective moment.

Real Abstractions

“If wandering is the liberation from every given point in space, and thus the conceptual opposite to fixation at such a point, the sociological form of the ‘stranger’ presents the unity, as it were, of these two characteristics.”³³ The first sentence of George Simmel’s essay “The Stranger” names the form of an ambivalent social relation. This is not the visiting relative or tourist, he elaborates, who comes today and goes tomorrow, but the person who comes today and stays tomorrow while keeping open the option of leaving once more. Simmel has in mind here the trader, often Jewish, who “imports qualities into the group which don’t stem from the group itself.”³⁴ Traders’ mobility is a resource, creating opportunities to arbitrage differences in access to goods, services, and information. Yet a mobile minority also appears to the majority “owners of the soil” as the objectification of their desires and anxieties. This position is precarious as well

³¹ Judith Farquhar, *Appetites: Food and Sex in Post-Socialist China* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

³² As Joan Scott points out, the evidence of experience supplying thick descriptions is itself a form of abstraction requiring interpretation. Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 5, 24; and Joan Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 4 (1994): 773–97.

³³ Georg Simmel, *Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. K.H. Wolff (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1950), 402.

³⁴ Simmel, 402–403.

as powerful: it has engendered scapegoating and genocide, as well as colonization by “stranger kings.”³⁵

The Stranger is both strange and familiar. “Between nearness and distance, there arises a specific tension when the consciousness that only the quite general is common, stresses that which is not common.”³⁶ The specific generality of the Stranger’s social position mirrors the generic specificity of the money with which they perform exchange.³⁷ This is the logical structure of the *fetisso*, an object with agency that mediated between West African and Portuguese traders during the sixteenth century. As described by William Pietz, *fetissos* were African religious objects that operated as a contract in material form, commensurate to mutually incomprehensible regimes of value.³⁸ They conjured a generally agreed upon—and therefore familiar—consciousness that determined specific claims, simultaneously bringing together and estranging parties to an exchange relation. If the arbitrage of African and European economies was the condition of possibility for the transatlantic slave trade, the *fetisso* created the possibility for that condition by holding difference in suspension. This object-agent, like the strangers who possessed it, embodied difference as such in the form of a generic specific that circulates and is therefore both near and distant, fixed and mobile, self and other.³⁹ This is what Marx (following

³⁵ Simmel, 404–405. On the ambivalence of strangers, see Bonnie Honig, *Democracy and the Foreigner* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

³⁶ Simmel, *Sociology of Georg Simmel*, 407.

³⁷ Simmel develops the implications of money’s specific generality in his most significant work, *The Philosophy of Money* (London: Routledge, 2004). On the logical compatibility of Simmel and Marx, see Simon Derpmann, “Money as a Generic Particular: Marx and Simmel on the Structure of Monetary Denominations,” *Review of Political Economy* 30, no. 3 (2018): 484–501.

³⁸ William Pietz, “The Problem of the Fetish, II: The Origin of the Fetish,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 13 (1987): 23–45. Pietz emphasizes the significance of the *fetisso* for Europeans. On the historical manufacture, symbolic efficacy, and utility of “fetish” objects in West Africa, see Florence Bernault, “Body, Power and Sacrifice in Equatorial Africa,” *Journal of African History* 47 (2006): 207–39; and Jane Guyer, *Marginal Gains: Monetary Transactions in Atlantic Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

³⁹ William Pietz, “The Problem of the Fetish, Part 1,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 9 (1985): 5–17.

Hegel) refers to as “an abstraction which becomes true in practice”: a real abstraction.

Whereas thought abstractions represent reality, real abstractions are real in themselves.

They are ideas with fact value and efficacy. One such objectified idea is Marx’s dancing table, a “commodity fetish” that is animated with thought:

If commodities could speak, they would say this: our use-value may interest men, but it does not belong to us as objects. What does belong to us as objects, however, is our value. Our own intercourse as commodities proves it. We relate to each other merely as exchange-values.⁴⁰

Marx is referring here to the dual sociality of the commodity. Its value is indeterminate until it is purchased. Use-value is merely a reflection of another’s desire, concrete to the consumer but abstract to the object itself. Exchange-value, on the other hand, is abstract to the buyer and the seller but concrete to the commodity. This is because the commodity only realizes its own potentiality when it appears in the form of price. The act of exchange retroactively attributes this value to the commodity as an intrinsic substance that it possessed all along.

In the same way, the value of a fact appears as its validity within a scientific community. The objective observer brings the results of research to the marketplace of ideas where they are animated by the self-referential appearance of evidential value. In this way, scientific facts talk to each other. They can be compared and aggregated or opposed, whatever the circumstances of personal ambition, competition, and collaboration that went into their creation. Like the *fetisso*, the stand-alone datum is a social object that is made into nature through scientific practice.⁴¹ Understood in relation to the political economy of colonialism, empiricism emerged not as the spontaneous recognition of theory-free materiality, but as a counter-theological discourse among

⁴⁰ Karl Marx, *Capital, A Critique of Political Economy, Vol I*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1976), 163–64; 176–77.

⁴¹ Bill Maurer, “Fact and Fetish in Creolization Studies: Herskovits and the Problem of Induction, or, Guinea Coast, 1593,” *New West Indian Guide* 1–2 (2002): 5–22.

“reasoned men” who could verify facticity by agreement.⁴² The epistemological differentiation of mind from matter was motivated by a mercantile economy that furnished strange new materials to be classified as knowledge, commodified for sale, and monetized for purposes of insurance, particularly with respect to the slave trade. “During the seventeenth century,” Bill Maurer points out, “the word ‘fetish’ entered Europeans’ vocabularies in the sense of an object possessed of a spirit of its own, just as ‘fact’ took on the sense of an object possessed of an ontology of its own.”⁴³

The entanglement of theory and practice is disavowed by the conceptual duality of mind and matter, yet also supports it. In his later writings on scientific method, pragmatist philosopher C. S. Peirce argued that inductive reasoning, which indexes reality, and deductive reasoning, which represents it symbolically, are only possible by virtue of a third “sensuous element of thought,” which he called abduction. “Our logically controlled thoughts compose a small part of the mind, the mere blossom of a vast complexus which we may call the instinctive mind in which this man will not say that he has faith because that implies the conceivability of distrust, but upon which he builds as the very fact to which it is the whole business of his logic to be true.”⁴⁴ Emerging from the unconscious ground of experience, this “lateral reason” establishes a relation with sense data before it is even identified as a generalizable object of perception.⁴⁵ It is the physician’s attention, the detective’s intuition, and the precondition for scientific observation,

⁴² Lorraine Daston, “The Factual Sensibility,” *Isis* 79 (1988): 452–70; and Mary Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

⁴³ Maurer, “Fact and Fetish,” 17.

⁴⁴ C. S. Peirce, “Pragmatism as the Logic of Abduction,” in *The Essential Peirce, Vol. II* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 241.

⁴⁵ Bill Maurer, *Mutual Life, Limited: Islamic Banking, Alternative Currencies, Lateral Reason* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Bateson, *Mind and Nature*, 142–43.

but also the feeling of trust, the mimesis of art, and the free association through which we process anomalous information in everyday life.⁴⁶

Even the committed neo-Kantians of classical sociology had difficulty keeping the concept and its object apart. In his descriptions of social phenomena, Durkheim treated his own representations as social fact while rejecting the representations of its participants. Weber comprehended reality through a “conceptual shorthand” that postulates causal relations.⁴⁷ In both cases, the validation of inference through inductive and deductive methods reinforces the distinction between the concept and the fact only because the researcher, convinced of her objectivity, banishes disputable facts and indeterminate concepts to “the vast chaotic stream of events, which flows away through time.”⁴⁸ Simmel’s emergent “forms of sociation,” on the other hand, are reminiscent of Peircean abduction. For Simmel, the “vast chaotic stream” of experience, in its nullity and threat to the understanding, is the possibility for conditions of analysis. Simmel’s model is neither a social fact nor an ideal type, but an active relation of difference, grasped abductively, that shapes how people perceive themselves and each other. Like the fetish and the fact, “the Stranger” is the particular instantiation of a general idea with status that is immediately recognizable: you know it when you see it.

Models don’t only exist in the mind of the researcher. In Simmel’s words, “The objectivity of a theoretical observation does not refer to the mind as a passive tabula rasa on which things inscribe their qualities, but on the contrary, to its full activity that operates according to its own laws, and to the elimination, thereby, of accidental dislocations and

⁴⁶ Carlo Ginzburg and Anna Davin, “Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method,” *History Workshop* 9, (1980): 5–36; Walter Benjamin, “On the Mimetic Faculty,” *Selected Writings, Vol. 2, Part 2*, ed. M.W. Jennings et al. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999).

⁴⁷ Weber, “Objectivity of Social Science,” 94.

⁴⁸ Weber, 111.

emphases, whose individual and subjective differences would produce different pictures of the same object.”⁴⁹ The “laws” of activity are objective insofar as they generate a common situation that is both a presupposition—a condition or platform—for interaction and itself an object of inquiry by observers observing observers. Any “outsider within” is already captured by the model of the Stranger and must acknowledge this in order to function: traders and immigrants, racial minorities, and people “like the poor and like sundry ‘inner enemies,’” and even the ethnographer, who “often receives the most surprising openness—confidences which sometimes have the character of a confessional and which would be carefully withheld from a more closely related person.”⁵⁰ The preliminary intuitive leap by which the Stranger and the scientist participate in what is being observed is both the analogical method, the pattern that connects, and the intuitive source of social know-how that grounds representations of knowledge.

Ethnography as a method relies on speculative inference that participates in the reality it observes. We cannot avoid the “divinatory systems” of social science: rational procedures that attribute novel descriptions, or new norms, to recognized facts within an epistemic order.⁵¹ The observation of experience involves models that convert thinking-in-action into thought that acts. As Farquhar writes, “the patterns we recognize ... are that subset of the possible that a practical person might call the actual.”⁵² It is by recognizing our informant’s patterns of life that anthropologists make the strange familiar, and by bringing attention to these patterns we make the familiar strange. The emergent perceptions of an embedded participant observer are incompatible with structural analyses that explain those dynamics from an external standpoint.

⁴⁹ Simmel, *Sociology of Georg Simmel*, 404.

⁵⁰ Simmel, 402–404.

⁵¹ Stephan Palmié, “Genomics, Divination, ‘Racecraft,’” *American Ethnologist* 34, no. 2 (2007): 210.

⁵² Judith Farquhar, *A Way of Life: Things, Thought, and Action in Chinese Medicine* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020), 105.

However, both are forms of knowledge that draw coherence, however provisional, from the practice of ethnography.

In the discussion that follows, I explore the sociality of my informants through a series of opposing models that mirror the formative distinction of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. Three ethnographic accounts raise questions that are addressed with a structural model, which presupposes a whole from which to analyze its working parts, and a process model, which posits the interaction between parts from which to extrapolate a dynamic whole. First, I contrast the notion of a ritually self-generating community with the virtual transitivity of a network. Second, I consider the sociological ideal of immigrant integration and its incongruity with the caste logic that inflects interracial relations in the United States. Third, I review the duality between gift and commodity exchange as a mechanism of spatio-historical distancing in anthropology. In each case, I use ethnography to demonstrate how the play of complementarity and incompatibility operates within the opposition, infusing its models with efficacy.

Community/Network

The hosts of our first Thanksgiving Party that evening were Sandrine, a Muslim from Ivory Coast, and her Christian husband, Francois, who had been a political scientist at the University of Abidjan but now drove a cab. We entered their dilapidated Victorian rental through the kitchen, where three women smiled warmly but didn't switch into French or English—they were speaking Baoulé, Amina would tell me later. In the living room, the women had pushed the furniture against the walls and were dancing with the children while the men drank beer and

argued about politics in the dining room. The music was loud enough to muffle their raised voices.⁵³

We stepped onto a screened-in porch where we found Amina's good friend Fatima smoking a cigarette with Hamidou, their imam's son.

"Where's Boureima?" Amina teased Fatima in French. "You told him I was going to be here, didn't you?"

Fatima snorted and turned to me. "My husband doesn't like my friends. He can't stand strong women." I asked her to elaborate, and they told me the story of how Amina and Fatima had co-organized the rotating credit association to help women start businesses of their own, apart from husbands who were monopolizing their earnings. The *ésusu* required a monthly investment by each of its members, who were then entitled to take out an interest-free loan when it was their turn, or in case of emergency.⁵⁴ Membership had mushroomed, but so had the emergencies: saving mortgages; paying bills, lawyers and court fees; buying plane tickets and rescuing women whose husbands had taken second wives in Africa. The fact that the *ésusu* was only open to women was a point of contention, and some men would not allow their wives to participate.

⁵³ Political turmoil following the death of first president Felix Houphouët-Boigny led to a coup d'état in 1999 and civil wars in 2002 and 2011, generating tensions that my interlocutors from Côte d'Ivoire generally avoided in everyday interactions, only to erupt during moments of lesser vigilance.

⁵⁴ There is an extensive anthropological literature on rotating credit associations in Africa and elsewhere. Relevant to this study are Shirley Ardener, "The Comparative Study of Rotating Credit Associations," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 94, no. 2 (1964): 201–29; Ahmed Beita Yusuf, "Capital Formation and Management among the Muslim Hausa Traders of Kano, Nigeria," *Africa* 45, no. 2 (1975): 167–82; and Theodore Trefon, "Changing Patterns of Solidarity in Kinshasa," *Cadernos de Estudos Africanos* 3 (2002): 93–109; Isabelle Guerin, "Women and Money: Lessons from Senegal," *Development and Change* 37, no. 3 (2006): 549–70.

“They don’t want to believe that we can take care of ourselves,” said Amina.

“No, that’s not it,” retorted Fatima. “They just think that everything we own should belong to them, even when they don’t give us enough money for rent and groceries. Isn’t that right, Hamidou?”

Hamidou appeared to find this remark amusing. “A man must have his dignity,” he replied.

Fatima rolled her eyes. “Dignity doesn’t put the food on the table now, does it? Women do.” She was expressing a complaint I heard often among African women in the U.S. that men lie about their earnings, spend money impulsively, and are reluctant to share.

“It is a woman’s job to support her husband,” Hamidou said, more seriously this time.

“It’s a woman’s job to feed her children,” Amina responded, with an absolutely straight face.

“Even when he’s married, with children of his own!” Fatima added, and all three of them cracked up.

Amina would tell me later that Fatima had been a prize-winning runner in Mali, and Hamidou had been a professional soccer-player in Burkina Faso. Their affinity piqued the jealousy of Fatima’s husband, with whom she already had a very competitive relationship. She had infuriated Boureima recently by refusing to take out a loan on his behalf. Distrustful of local connections, he had borrowed from his brother in Bamako to start his moving business and now wanted to buy a second truck since foreclosures were forcing so many families to move. He was reluctant to go back to his brother, whose financial demands were never-ending even after Boureima repaid the principal a year ago. Fatima told him that he could get a commercial loan

now that his business was doing so well. He was stingy with his money, and she would have lost her shop if not for the *ésusu*.

Fatima rose from her chair and beckoned us to dance with her. Hamidou demurred but Amina did not; dancing was the polite thing to do. Despite her formal manner, Amina moved easily but I couldn't shake the image of myself as a clumsy child between the two women, both over six feet tall with their *boubous* flowing like wings at their sides. Amina always knew how to move. She had an uncanny sense of propriety, knowing which invitations must be accepted, when to move on and when to push, when to withdraw and when to pry. She was not easily intimidated yet flexible when resisted, constantly adjusting her expectations, riding the currents of her days without losing sight of her capacity to act. At this party she had hoped to collect down payments for boubous that she would bring back from our upcoming trip to Africa, but no one seemed to have much cash on hand, and most of the exchanges she was counting on did not come to pass. She did not seem disappointed, however. There was a night of dancing ahead.

“Bring your party in here!” Sandrine called to us from the door. Everyone was coming together in the living room to sing happy birthday in four languages to a little girl who had just turned eleven. Someone organized a dance contest for the children, who outdid each other as they were showered with dollar bills. They each received an equal share of the money afterwards. “Everybody wins!” someone said.

My informants seemed to know how to create community. The dancing would generate excitement, and then money would flow, enriching common ground. Wherever my fieldwork took me, I found myself at events in which dancing, singing, and dollar bills were central features: private gatherings like Sandrine's party, public events like Bintu's *sabaar*, even church services. For Durkheim, this collective discharge of affective and embodied energy actualizes the

community as a social fact. He used the Polynesian word “mana” to name a concept that could not be grasped because its power is its ambiguity: it is both inside and outside its participants, a personal experience that is also an impersonal religious force. It is self-referential, a contagious enthusiasm that threatens disorder yet also affirms the order that contains it. “By a sort of contradiction,” wrote Durkheim, “the sacred world is as though inclined by its very nature to spread into the same profane world that it otherwise excludes.”⁵⁵ Ritual is the means through which this generative energy is activated and transformed into the durable structures of social life.

The structuring power of performance has been a central concern for anthropologists. Mary Douglas, for example, emphasized the purifying function of ritual as a form of boundary maintenance.⁵⁶ Edmund Leach and Victor Turner were more interested in the active management of potential conflict between individual desires and social norms.⁵⁷ Max Gluckman developed an approach to political conflict as a kind of “ritualization” through which challenges to authority reconstituted equilibrium.⁵⁸ For Roy Rappaport, ritual is a form of community self-programming in which participation is a performative speech act—saying by doing—that overrides personal ambivalence.⁵⁹ Despite disagreements among these approaches, they share a concern with the integrity of the social group: the self-referentiality of ritual action addresses itself as an object

⁵⁵ Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms*, 322.

⁵⁶ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966).

⁵⁷ Edmund Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure* (London: Athlone Press, 1970); Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969).

⁵⁸ Max Gluckman, “Les Rites de Passage,” in *The Ritual of Social Relations*, ed. M. Gluckman (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1962).

⁵⁹ Roy Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 96–106.

that it brings into being. As Rappaport points out, this unifying effect is particularly significant with respect to resident aliens, anomalous figures with ambiguous positions who must actualize their membership through ritual.⁶⁰ Their involvement both articulates and preserves the autonomy of separate worlds by performing commitments that pledge future support. These commitments may be instrumental. What is most significant, however, is not the personal agenda of the participants but the formalization of their relationships: ritual reduces uncertainty by affirming conventions that subordinate self-interest to a common good.

According to the rules of ritual, the observer must participate. Unlike with drama and sporting events where spectators are external to the action, the efficacy of ritual performance depends on its totalizing commitments: a passive onlooker threatens to degrade the event to mimicry.⁶¹ I was compelled to dance, and soon got into the habit of keeping a stash of dollar bills for such events. Thanksgiving was a fitting pretext for gatherings that marked the season among people from different parts of Africa—different traditions, different religions, all having experienced the same *rite de passage* of migration. But what was the money about? Was it a medium of participation, demonstrating the “buy in” of community membership in which “everybody wins”? Was money the totem that reified the “mana” of the group? For Durkheim, the totem was “a thing that is equally common to all,” an arbitrary sign without an intrinsic relation to the group that served as a focus and materialization of collective effervescence.⁶² It is a representation that acts, a fetish. In his commitment to the social totality as an elementary form, Durkheim distinguished totemism, which symbolically expresses the spiritual power of a community, from fetishism, which alienates that spiritual power in material form for the use of

⁶⁰ Rappaport, 76.

⁶¹ Rappaport, 41

⁶² Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms*, 222.

an individual.⁶³ For Marx, however, the commodity fetish is also a totem because it is alienated not with respect to its ends but with respect to its origins in collective human activity. William Mazzarella brings out a latent affinity between Durkheim and Marx when he argues that *sui generis* brand name products may be considered the totemic expression of capitalism as a social system that collectively reproduces itself.⁶⁴

The migrant community that constitutes itself through these rituals has come together by virtue of the commensurating effects of the dollar. Did cash offerings represent the centrality of monetary exchange, the commodification of all things? Could it be an attempt to neutralize the alienation of migrant labor? Were money's contagious properties being ritually contained within the circle of family and friends? Mazzarella asks, "How is it that certain human subjects and certain nonhuman objects come to resonate with each other so as to allow a constitutive bond to form between them, a bond that allows both subject and object to become themselves via each other?"⁶⁵ While Durkheim's clan totem may have been hereditary, the disparate collection of individuals and families that gathered together for celebrations during my fieldwork were already interpellated as economic agents seeking to accumulate and circulate money through transnational networks. In symbolic terms, their ritual display of money may have been "epideictic": communicating the size and strength of the group to itself.⁶⁶ "It is obvious," writes

⁶³ Durkheim, 174–82.

⁶⁴ William Mazzarella, *The Mana of Mass Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 84.

⁶⁵ Mazzarella, 88.

⁶⁶ In classical rhetoric, epideictic oratory is praise or blame that has a performative effect on its audience. See Barbara Cassin and Andrew Goffey, "Sophistics, Rhetorics, and Performance: or, How to Really Do Things with Words," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 42, no. 4 (2009): 349–72. In his use of the term, French anthropologist Charles-Henry Pradelles de Latour explores the retroactive temporality of *epideixis* in his analysis of matrimonial alliance among the Bamileke in Cameroon as the expression of symbolic debt. "L'alliance matrimoniale des sociétés traditionnelles: entre discours épideictique et discours apodictique, entre dette symbolique et échange," *L'Homme* 217 (2016): 45–59.

Rappaport, “that the worthiness, influence or renown being represented are related to states of affairs external to their display.”⁶⁷ Whatever the amount, cash indexes greater wealth elsewhere, translating the analogic value of goodwill into metric terms. It registers mutual support as a substantial commitment that will provide protection from the contagious forces of greed, deceit, and financial uncertainty that threaten the community from within and without.

Yet if performative speech acts and money articulates disparate parts within a bounded community, they also link persons and things within unbounded networks. Durkheim’s pure model of the primitive collective led him to dismiss magic and healing as the utilitarian application of *mana* to meet individual needs and, as such, essentially profane and corrupting.⁶⁸ Likewise, the categorical distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, adapted by Durkheim as mechanical versus organic solidarity, represses what Mazzarella calls “the dialectical ambiguity of excess potential.”⁶⁹ There is *mana* in the instability of the opposition between social totality and self-interested action: the possibility of broken commitments threatens to undermine the ritually-circumscribed social order, just as networks of potential relations congeal into groups. Take the controversial *ésusu*, for example. What for Fatima’s husband was an unnatural attempt to serve personal interests at the expense of “the community” was for the women a form of mutual protection against the patriarchal entitlement of the men. When these relations are modeled as social networks, competing claims to resources on behalf of community appear as discontinuities—breaks in an infrastructure of connection and flow.

⁶⁷ Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 86. Rappaport’s discussion draws from the work of zoologist V. C. Wynne-Edwards, who described “epideictic display” as a mechanism of group selection.

⁶⁸ Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms*, 39–44. Durkheim’s nephew Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert elaborated on, and to some degree corrected for, this intransigence in their *General Theory of Magic* (New York: Routledge, 2001). On the political implications of this disagreement, see Mazzarella, *The Mana of Mass Society*, 89–91.

⁶⁹ Mazzarella, 69.

Network models map relations among individuals. Simmel is often identified as the progenitor of network analysis, yet his intuitive methods and the internal ambivalence of his “forms of sociation” lack the fixity required of a map. For Simmel, social distance is the expression of spatio-temporally specific relations in the world.⁷⁰ “The Stranger” has a metonymic relation to the group: it is a position embodying the limit that constitutes membership itself and is thus integral to its existence. In other words, it is a reflexive form; it references itself as a distinction that it also enacts. It was Simmel’s student, Robert Park, founder of the Chicago School of Sociology, who disassociated the symbolic representation of human relations from their experiential conditions of emergence.⁷¹ For Park, social connection was an evolutionary function of consciousness, an inter-subjective tendency towards identification that instinctively rejects difference. Park used Weberian ideal types as metaphors to describe categories that could be substantiated through statistical surveys. The frequency, intensity, and spatial extension of relations, quantified as an index of social conflict, were interpreted as an effect of relative alienation. Abstracted from the context of encounter, inequality thus appeared as the failure of transactional opportunity rather than structural exclusion. The measurement of social distance in charts and graphs converted the formal paradox of “the Stranger” into a functional problem of “marginal man” requiring policy solutions.⁷²

⁷⁰ Simmel, *Sociology of Georg Simmel*, 402.

⁷¹ Philip J. Ethington, “The Intellectual Construction of ‘Social Distance’: Toward a Recovery of Georg Simmel’s Social Geometry,” *Cybergeog: European Journal of Geography* 30 (1997).

⁷² Robert Ezra Park, “The Concept of Social Distance as Applied to the Study of Racial Attitudes and Racial Relations,” *Journal of Applied Sociology* 8 (1924): 339–44; and “Human Migration and the Marginal Man,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 33, no. 6 (1928): 881–93.

According to network models, social patterns appear as an effect of local interactions. Nevertheless, some system must be presupposed to make those interactions possible. For Weber it was the cultural lifeworld of subjectively meaningful action; for Park it was the natural lifeworld to which humans must adapt.⁷³ Noting that migration brings together people who would otherwise have nothing to do with each other, Park was optimistic about the equalizing tendencies of *Gesellschaft*. “The movement and migration of peoples, the expansion of trade and commerce, and particularly the growth, in modern times, of these vast melting-pots of races and cultures, the metropolitan cities, has loosened local bonds, destroyed the cultures of tribe and folk, and substituted for the local loyalties the freedom of the cities.”⁷⁴ Through an adaptive “race relations cycle” of competition, institutionalization, and evolutionary change, social interactions among these liberated individuals would assimilate disparate communities into a single, more inclusive society.⁷⁵

This model of integration through the proliferation of networks remains a powerful heuristic in the sociology of international migration. With variations in emphasis, this scholarship conceptualizes society as an aggregate of microlevel interactions into self-organizing webs of varying density. Relations among social actors are modeled as dyads that are mediated by a third: the friend of a friend who is also a friend. As theorized by Simmel, this mediation both unites and separates binary relations as they surface and disappear within the “indescribable

⁷³ “Like the simple adaptive mechanisms of the plant by which it gets air, and of the animal by which it overcomes its rivals in battle, the supremely differentiated functions of thought and human relations are the outcome of the necessity of the organism to become adapted to entities in its environment.” Park and Ernest W. Burgess, *Introduction to the Science of Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1921), 526.

⁷⁴ Robert Park, “Human Migration,” 890.

⁷⁵ Park and Burgess, *Introduction to the Science*, 785. Park’s theory of assimilation owes an obvious debt to Durkheim: “Social institutions are not founded in similarities any more than they are founded in differences, but in relations, and in the mutual interdependence of the parts” (759).

dynamics and fullness” of daily life.⁷⁶ Contemporary sociologists have lent rigor to their models by converting this triad into an elementary form that features the logical requirement of transitivity. Like a verb that must take a direct object, a transitive relation must establish a link between A and C whenever $A=B$ and $B=C$. This linear conclusion transforms inter-subjectivity into social theory by presuming that the third leg of a mutual relation can always be activated. In the 1970s, social scientists began to detect this structure in sociometric data that they gathered by measuring the density of clusters and the distribution of nodes within networks.⁷⁷ Mixing quantitative and qualitative data, Mark Grannoveter found that weak ties are strong because triads infinitely replicate themselves through the diffusion of information.⁷⁸ Influenced by behavioral economics, Ronald S. Burt argued that organizations adapt, firms succeed, and societies integrate by producing new connections that bridge “structural holes” in the network.⁷⁹ David Massey introduced a theory of cumulative causation to explain migration as a rational response to opportunity structures that reduce transaction costs, redistribute income, and mitigate risk.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, 145.

⁷⁷ Paul W. Holland and Samuel Leinhardt, “A Method for Detecting Structure in Sociometric Data,” *American Journal of Sociology* 76, no. 3 (1970): 492–513.

⁷⁸ According to Mark Grannoveter’s influential argument, predicated on the impossibility of “forbidden triads,” weak ties—the set of people comprising a low-density network—may be a more effective means for the emergence of opportunity structures than the strong ties of kinship and intimate friendships. This is particularly the case when weak ties act as bridges between network segments. Mark S. Granovetter, “The Strength of Weak Ties,” *American Journal of Sociology* 78, no. 6 (1973): 1360–80.

⁷⁹ Ronald S. Burt, *Structural Holes: The Social Structure of Competition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

⁸⁰ Douglas Massey, “Social Structure, Household Strategies, and the Cumulative Causation of Migration,” *Population Index* 56, no. 1 (1990): 3–26. There is a vast sociological literature on network formation as a driver of international migration. For a comprehensive review of the literature, a staple of migration studies programs worldwide is Steven Castles et al., *The Age of Migration, Fifth Edition: International Population Movements in the Modern World* (New York: Guilford Press, 2013).

British social anthropologists were less optimistic than the Chicago School sociologists with regard to the equalizing impact of modernization. “Whatever social system they have had in the past,” remarked J.A. Barnes, “some form of class society develops as industrialization proceeds.”⁸¹ His study of a Norwegian fishing village introduced network methods to anthropology. He and his colleagues were seeking a flexible yet coherent form that would make sense of heterogeneous relations among strangers. Compared with the kinship relations of small-scale societies in which everyone had a place, complex societies demonstrated a *reduction* in transitivity. Thus, anthropologists of the network were concerned from the start with what might be lost, both to their informants and to themselves as observers. In an extensive literature review in 1974, J. Clyde Mitchell noted a distinction between anthropological studies using networks as a model to explain a theory of social behavior and those using models of social behavior, such as exchange or political action, to explain a theory of networks.⁸² The former logic is “more or less an offshoot of the Durkheimian quest for solidarity and consensus,” grounding networks in a shared institutional structure. Mitchell’s own work, for example, adapted the convention of the kinship network to describe urban “sodalities” that extended, transgressed, and improvised on rural commitments among African migrant workers in the Copperbelt of Southern Africa.⁸³ A “transactional” approach, in contrast, treats structure as the aggregate effect of strategic behavior to achieve personal goals.

⁸¹ J. A. Barnes, “Class and Committees in a Norwegian Island Parish,” *Human Relations* 7 (1954): 57.

⁸² J. Clyde Mitchell, “Social Networks,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 3 (1974): 285. This classification is proposed by G. A. Banck, “Network Analysis and Social Theory,” in *Network Analysis: Studies in Human Interaction*, ed. J. Boissevain et al. (The Hague: Mouton, 1973), 37–44.

⁸³ J. Clyde Mitchell, *Social Networks in Urban Situations: Analysis of Personal Relationships in Central African Towns*. (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1969); and A.L. Epstein et al., “Urbanization and Social Change in Africa,” *Current Anthropology* 8, no. 4 (1969): 275–95.

Though Mitchell does not mention Weber by name, his review reflects how competing epistemologies had become institutionalized within the social sciences along the classic distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*.⁸⁴ He distinguishes Durkheimian and Weberian orientations by “level of abstraction,” noting that networks are metaphors that do not rise to the level of theory. Mistaking a mere heuristic for an explanatory framework encourages tautological thinking, he observes, in which the features of a map, however derived from observation, become the criterion by which those observations are interpreted. This criticism clearly applies to the positive conversion of Simmel’s ambivalent forms into a mechanism that measures itself. Insofar as Mitchell is a positivist himself, however, he detects in the network form a deeper problem with anthropological claims to scientific validity:

My own view on the subject is that the debate is more about words than reality. There is no network theory in the sense of "basic assumptions together with a set of derived propositions which are interlinked and capable of being tested." But I suspect that there are few theories in social anthropology of this kind at all. That propositions may be derived from a consideration of the characteristics of social networks is, I think, evident.⁸⁵

Social scientists rely on theory to establish critical distance from the world they describe. Yet when these presuppositions are operationalized as working models, descriptions become demonstrations. The distance between observer and observed phenomena collapses into a model that describes itself.

⁸⁴ The ideological, institutional, and national dimensions of this social scientific division of labor were extremely complex and are beyond the scope of this discussion. See Carl E. Plutsch, “The Three Worlds, or the Division of Social Scientific Labor, Circa 1950-1975,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23, no. 4 (1981): 565–90.

⁸⁵ Mitchell, “Social Networks,” 283.

Unlike the community, which places the observer outside a limit of belonging, the network places the observer within a potential infinity of transitive extensions. For example, that connections will create more connections is the assumption behind “snowball sampling,” the method through which I was able to make new contacts during my fieldwork.⁸⁶ Each relationship held the possibility for others, and the promise of reconnection persisted even when limits of time or logistics often got in the way. Thus, my strategy for identifying informants both presupposed and confirmed the existence of a network. Just as Grannoveter predicted, I was surprised by both the preponderance of “weak ties” and their indistinguishability from strong ones. My informants generally asserted that they prioritized kin relations wherever they happened to be living. Many were involved in national diaspora organizations and gravitated towards other francophone migrants or anglophones speaking shared or related African languages. Nevertheless, their closest connections were often made through shared experiences in the United States and often included non-Africans as well.

Everyone seemed to be connected. While certain obligations were based on role expectations, other relationships escaped classification altogether. Personal loyalties diverged from normative axes of identification. Variable idioms of locality, nationality, ethnicity, religion, or gender might be invoked as common referents within an encounter. In addition, while some relations seemed to escape definition, others were not what they seemed. A range of relationships were coded as family. Elders were routinely referred to as mother, father, or aunt, and people who shared language, ethnicity, and region of origin often called each other sister and brother.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ “Snowball sampling” builds a study sample as part of the research process—rather than establishing its parameters beforehand—by following up on the referrals of informants. Patrick Biernacki and Dan Waldorf, “Snowball Sampling: Problems and Techniques of Chain Referral Sampling,” *Sociological Methods and Research* 10, no. 2 (1981): 141–63.

⁸⁷ Carol Stack, *All Our Kin* (New York: Basic Books, 1974).

Claude and Sylvie, for example, grew up in neighboring villages in the Equateur province of DRC. Amina addressed Nadine and Marieme as sisters, yet called her own sister by her given name. Martine and Odette, who share a father, met their third sister, Kenza (also from Coutonou) in a Chicago ESL program. Noufou started a computer consulting business with an African American brother from college. Hamidou's brother was actually a close friend from Dubai; they had met at a French soccer camp when they were teenagers.

On the other hand, both "fictive" and formal relations of kinship involved varying degrees of closeness and variable outcomes. In fact, *de facto* ties might be more reliable than *de jure* kinship. "My brother is a person who must be forgiven," a Beninois told me. "Which is why he can't be trusted." Oscar and his brother had bought a car together and were working as Uber drivers until Oscar's brother decided to take off for Atlanta. Their Guinean landlord let Oscar use his car in the evenings until he could save up the money to buy his own. "Yaya, he's my brother now." In Dakar, Amina's mother told me that she had a third child, a son who for decades had been living in Paris without legal status and unable to travel. He had never come up in conversation. Similarly, Claude was estranged from an older brother who often pressured their sister to ask Claude for help. What about the "forbidden triads" of intransitivity, the vectors that fail?⁸⁸ I considered explanations for the variability of affect, norms, and expectations among my informants. Has the history of trade and migratory labor patterns in West and Central Africa encouraged coping strategies well-suited to uncertain landscapes?⁸⁹ Did competing pressures on

⁸⁸ Katherine Faust, "Very Local Structure in Social Networks," *Sociological Methodology* 37 (2007): 209–56.

⁸⁹ See Adhemar Byl, "The Evolution of the Labor Market in French-Speaking West Africa," *Weltwirtschaftliches Archiv* 97 (1966): 163–212; Jan Vansina, "Long-Distance Trade-Routes in Central Africa," *The Journal of African History* 3, no. 3 (1962): 375–90; Ralph Austen, *African Economic History* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1987); and Achille Mbembe, "At the Edge of the World: Boundaries, Territoriality, and Sovereignty in Africa," *Public Culture* 12, no. 1 (2000): 259–84. Mbembe

limited income encourage the cultivation of social capital? Were people newly distanced from ascriptive obligations improvising a voluntarist alternative that combined the security of mutual aid with a greater degree of personal autonomy? What was I missing? How would I ever know?

Insofar as my informants knew themselves as a network, connection was performed at events such as Bintu's *sabaar*. Yet it also often failed to appear on demand. Festivals and funerals drew a larger crowd than advocacy meetings; Pentecostal preachers and Mouride marabouts packed the house while more traditional religious services did not. Thus, contrary to Granovetter's axiom that even weak ties are strong, poorly attended events showed that they were not always so reliable. Barnes coined the term "structural amnesia" to describe the widely-observed tendency among the members of a lineage to report only those links that enhance one's reputation.⁹⁰ This selective forgetting and disenrollment, Barnes argued, is "a feature that is made immediately apparent by the genealogical method" in the graphic reduction of complexity that preserves the framework. Annelise Riles logically extends this insight in her ethnography of global advocacy to show that failure is endemic to the network form: its practices point to its own incompleteness. Networks do not refer to a reality outside themselves; they are aesthetic devices determined by the intimate negotiations and irreconcilable differences that are not registered on the map yet generate the appearance of relations that "work".⁹¹

This is not to say that networks do not exist, whereas communities do. A model that is reduced to an aggregate of interactions is nothing but its own performance. Yet the collective

points to how dynamic territorial boundaries historically encouraged "an extraordinary superposition of rights and an interlacing of social ties that was reducible neither to family relationships, religion, nor castes alone." The invention and instrumentalization of family ties is also a defining characteristic of postcolonial politics.

⁹⁰ J. A. Barnes, "The Collection of Genealogies," *Rhodes-Livingstone Journal* 5 (1947): 48–55.

⁹¹ Annelise Riles, *The Network Inside Out* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 66–69.

performance of ritual is no less contingent and its representation no more real. As Mitchell suggests, it is the tautological tendency of any explanatory framework to internally produce its own reality, creating the structural holes along with the links. The structural amnesia of the informants is matched by the amnesia of the ethnographer with respect to her creation of the structure itself. Whether or not the observer is “objectively” partitioned, her presence is enacted in the reflexivity of a proposition that asserts its reality in the field as it is tested. My performance of observation created the impression of complexity and depth that lay just beneath the surface of my ethnographic encounters, just as my informants created a sense of community through their institutions and knowledge practices. The sociality of my informants is what Marilyn Strathern has called “a perspective seen twice”: a community and a network.⁹² They are two models in conceptual opposition that are predicated on the same activity. This social action is also doubled as the “two fields” of ethnography: the immersion of participation and the observation of writing.⁹³ The two sides of an opposition are like facing mirrors, a *mise en abyme*, recursively producing an image that generates its own real effects.

Integration/Diversity

During a break at Bintu’s *sabaar*, one of the *djembé* drummers pulled up a chair and told me that he wanted to practice his English.⁹⁴ “This party reminds me of when I was little. Sometimes I miss the community here.” Cherif had been born in New York but was brought to Dakar when he was twelve. “Over there it’s all the same people all the time,” he told me. What

⁹² Marilyn Strathern, *Partial Connections*, Updated Edition (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2004), 113.

⁹³ Marilyn Strathern, *Property, Substance and Effect: Anthropological Essays on Persons and Things* (London: Athlone Press, 1999).

⁹⁴ A rope-tuned, skin-covered drum about a foot tall, the *djembé* is used throughout the former Mali Empire: Senegal, Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, and Gambia.

he remembered best about the United States were the kids he knew in school. “We were from different countries, but we stuck together because we were Africans.” He seemed to be saying that his own “Africanness” had more value when he was not in Africa.

Amina was talking with someone else, but she laughed when she heard him say this. “Do you want to go to another party after this?” she asked him. She had been encouraging people to attend the Burkinabe event all evening.

“We’re going to have to go in Fatou’s car,” she told me later. “Otherwise, I won’t be able to get her to go.”

“I’m really tired,” Fatou complained as we stepped into the cold November night. “And I don’t like their music.” She would have preferred to have stayed at the Senegalese restaurant. She was also irritated that Amina had offered to lead another car across town to the church where the event was being held. When the other car stopped at a gas station, Fatou kept on driving. “Why didn’t they get gas beforehand if they knew they were going out?” she snapped.

The church parking lot was filling up when we arrived, and we were greeted by four separate women as we made our way to the door. Fatou smiled and waved. “They’re your friends, not mine,” she muttered to her sister.

“We’ve got to show our support,” Amina said mildly.

“They don’t show us no support,” Fatou retorted. “What do you mean? African people in Chicago, they don’t support each other.”

Amina was evidence to the contrary. I had noticed her weariness over the course of the evening, but she wasn’t out to have a good time with her friends. She was there because she had promised.

“Where’s Pelagie?” Amina asked friends who greeted us at the door. They had left Bintu’s party before we had. Fatou pulled me aside and told me that the \$20 cover charge was outrageous. “I’ll wait for you in the car.”

The church was packed with women and girls of all ages, while a scattering of men gathered outside or watched from the sidelines, taking photos and videos. It was their job to watch. “Amina!” cried the guest of honor. “Come sit!” Pelagie had worked at Amina’s salon when she first arrived in the United States, and now she had her own shop. She showed us photos on her smartphone from earlier that evening before returning to the dance floor.

“What’s the cause for celebration?” I asked Amina.

Amina shrugged. “Nothing special. They’re always asking me to do it, but I’ve declined. It’s a lot of work calling all those people and making sure they show up. I’ve got too much of that to do already.” She explained that the guest of honor was anyone who volunteered to take responsibility for a party’s success. “She’s the reason I’m here.”

The music was too loud for talking, so people either danced or sat in straight-backed chairs facing the center, watching others dance. After about half an hour, the women that Fatou had left behind at the gas station finally showed up. They had gotten lost and were obviously angry at Amina; though they smiled and waved, they didn’t come over to say hello. I watched women working the crowd, greeting each other, touching an arm here, a hand there, and talking, although it was impossible to hear what anybody was saying. Eventually Amina got up to dance while I stayed with our bags and our coats.

“Call Fatou and tell her we’re coming soon,” she told me. “Otherwise, she might leave us here!”

Once the dollar shower was over, Amina gestured for us to go. Pelagie came out with us to see Fatou, who had obviously been sleeping. They teased each other in French, and Fatou handed her a flyer for her teeth-whitening service.

“Don’t worry. I’ve got one for you too!” Fatou told me. On the way home she asked me if I had enjoyed myself. “What’s the point of going to any old party when you’re not going to have any fun?” she asked. “I got one look at all those kids in those short, short skirts and I was thinking, I’m not paying all that money to see that!”

Fatou was not unique in her preoccupation with fashion. Dressing well was a priority for both men and women, and style of dress made an explicit statement about origins and intentions. Beth Buggenhagen has described the sumptuous dress worn for such occasions in Senegal as both a marker of status and an enactment of women’s social networks.⁹⁵ Ethnographies among urban youth in Atlantic Africa have also described European and American fashions as a performance of virtual emigration.⁹⁶ Two idioms of self-presentation—expressing continuity and rupture, belonging and individuality—were on display at the community events I attended during my fieldwork. The range of personal styles in evidence was not only the aggregate effect of diversity; it also manifested a normativity of imperviousness to difference. It was this normativity, perhaps, that appealed to the *djembe* drummer with whom I had spoken earlier that evening. He had appreciated the mix of guests from different countries and found the insularity

⁹⁵ Beth Buggenhagen, *Muslim Families in Global Senegal: Money Takes Care of Shame* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012).

⁹⁶ Suzanne Scheld, “Youth Cosmopolitanism: Clothing, the City and Globalization in Dakar, Senegal,” *City and Society* 19, no. 2 (2007): 232–53. Also see Sasha Newell, *The Modernity Bluff: Crime, Consumption, and Citizenship in Côte d’Ivoire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); and Janet MacGaffey and Remy Bazenguissa-Ganga, *Congo-Paris: Transnational Traders on the Margins of the Law* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

of his relations in Dakar oppressive, whereas Fatou preferred to socialize with other Senegalese whom she already knew.

Fatou and the *djembe* drummer were about the same age and had crossed the Atlantic in opposite directions at about the same time. Eleven years old when she left Dakar to join her sister in Chicago, Fatou—like many of the young adults I met—identified herself as both African American and Senegalese, depending on the situation. “Senegalese women put up with too much abuse,” she told me once. “They’ll put everyone else before themselves. I’m not like that.” Yet she was particular about the norms of beauty, dress, and ritual that she remembered from childhood. Thus, Fatou’s objection to the short skirts of Burkinabe youth expressed a conservatism that may have seemed old world, yet was arguably more American or African, reflecting her preference for the American-style sociality of an intimate peer group over the broad-based sociality of a cross-diaspora event. She was more comfortable at Marième’s party, where she could contribute without effort to the performance of community. Her decision to wait in the car during the Burkinabe event enacted an intransitive rupture, at least in part. Yet it also invited an adaptive response by Pelagie, who sought her out that evening, as did a few other friends who called her the next day. Thus, Fatou’s bad manners and the conflicts that they provoked with her sister were counter-performative: her nonparticipation was itself a form of participation in the normative ethos that self-identifies as community. At that moment, Fatou was occupying the role of Simmel’s “Stranger” as surely as I was, at least as long as I was a curious observer who would not dance.

I have considered how the appearance of community from an external position of observation is enacted from within as a network of virtual connections that may or may not be realized. As forms of explanation, the concepts of community and network cast a shadow on the

ground of real content “out there.” From this social scientific standpoint, I might consider the Senegalese and Burkinabe events as evidence of two distinct, if overlapping groups that can be compared and contrasted on the basis of cultural characteristics. Or I might use the network model to measure the degree of social integration across communities of national origin based on the relative density of interpersonal connections. Experientially, however, the distinction between community and network disappears within a social imaginary that exists only insofar as it is lived by its members through ritual performance, mutual aid, and the fulfillment of commitments. In both registers, “the social” is a real abstraction that actualizes itself by producing evidence confirming its existence.

For the ethnographer who seeks to see this figure twice, as participant and as observer, what appears explicable is also arbitrary, even nonsensical. Why should the *djembe* drummer feel more at home on tour than with his family in Senegal? Why should Amina, Fatou, and Pelagie hold themselves to different behavioral norms? While these questions invite sociological generalizations, any analysis is predicated on an irreducible particularity of time, place, and personality. Explanation requires the bracketing of extraneous details, whereas a focus on the details—and their infinite actual and potential relations—sacrifices coherence. This is not a difference of perspective, but an absence of logical ground on which to predicate a relation of similarity or difference in the first place.

Following Kant, liberal states have sought to posit that ground in the form of a categorical imperative, the binding moral obligations of law. For the architects of immigration policy, for example, the nation-state must manage cultural diversity in the interest of social integration. In the United States, the civil rights movement gave rise to an ideal of multicultural pluralism that replaced the Chicago School’s homogenizing cosmopolitanism while preserving

its functionalist aims. In their 1963 *Beyond the Melting Pot*, Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan depicted African American, Jewish, Italian, and Irish communities as subcultures cultivating unique styles of success within American democracy.⁹⁷ They soon came under fire, however, as racial difference proved to be a more intransigent form of exclusion than ethnicity. With the abolition of national origin quotas in 1965, low-skilled immigration from the Global South expanded just as the postwar economy was beginning to shift, taking with it the mechanisms of wealth redistribution that had allowed non-black ethnicities to flourish. Patterns of labor market stratification began to appear, undermining the presumption of intergenerational mobility that had informed the sociology of race and migration since Park. In some quarters, narratives emerged pitting upwardly mobile immigrants against national minorities—the African and Native Americans whose histories of membership display the unmistakable features of caste.⁹⁸

Social scientists navigated this political volatility by developing tools that addressed variations in social status while evading the moral dilemma of systemic inequality. Granovetter, for instance, revised his influential theory of weak ties by “embedding” networks within social structures that constrained their extension. While he credited Karl Polanyi for introducing the notion of a socially-embedded economy, he distanced himself from Polanyi’s Marxism by

⁹⁷ Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians and Irish of New York City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1963). While Moynihan left the academy for politics, Glazer has published a series of amendments, rebuttals, and retractions in a career-long attempt to come to terms with U.S. politics of immigration and the failure of liberal democracy to heal the trauma of slavery. See Nathan Glazer, “‘Beyond the Melting Pot’ Twenty Years After,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 1, no. 1 (1981): 43–55; *We Are All Multiculturalists Now* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); and “On ‘Beyond the Melting Pot,’ 35 Year After,” *International Migration Review* 34, no. 1 (2000): 270–79.

⁹⁸ Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (New York: Random House, 2020).

applying what for Polanyi was a feature of pre-capitalist societies to contemporary markets.⁹⁹ “I assert that the level of embeddedness of economic behavior is lower in nonmarket societies than is claimed by substantivists and development theorists, and it has changed less with ‘modernization’ than they believe; but I argue also that this level has always been and continues to be more substantial than is allowed for by formalists and economists.”¹⁰⁰ This middle ground between “undersocialized” theories of economic action and “oversocialized” theories of overdetermination collapsed process and structure into a meso-level abstraction, equipping a generation of researchers with a framework for documenting growing inequality without abandoning faith in an integrated future. Their studies, in turn, informed policy measures to mitigate racial bias while encouraging immigrant entrepreneurialism.

Viewed in terms of embedded networks, immigration outcomes are a matter of social location on a national map scored with invisible barriers and particular opportunities that are shaped by the density of transitive relations. This was the working model among many of the advocates, organizers, and community leaders in Chicago. Ed Silverman, a leading architect of U.S. refugee resettlement, shared his experience among forced migrants in just these terms:

Part of the challenge that immigrants in general face is that a broad socioeconomic spectrum exists. So you have people thrown together. There are soldiers who know nothing except how to be a soldier, there are farmers and fishermen, and at the other extreme there are lawyers and doctors and high-level government people, and very successful entrepreneurs. Now, socially those groups would never have intermixed. But once they come here, they all have the same status, and they need to help each other. It was interesting that oftentimes, it was the lesser-educated people who progressed more rapidly than the well-educated people, because the well-educated people had very high expectations. I’m reminded of the old Russian adage: “It’s easy for a poor man to become rich. The other way is not so easy.”¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1944), 57.

¹⁰⁰ Mark Granovetter, “Economic Action and Social Structure: The Problem of Embeddedness,” *American Journal of Sociology* 91, no. 3 (1985): 482.

¹⁰¹ Personal communication, 2/28/12.

According to Silverman's account, immigrant adaptation is a challenging process involving unanticipated obstacles. Success is ultimately contingent on the migrant's transference of identification and expectations to a new context.¹⁰² Ironically, the transition from Polanyian embeddedness in class-specific kinship structures to Granovetter's embedded opportunity structures requires ethnicization in American terms. The relation between individual and community must be reconfigured for integration to occur.

Silverman influenced the integration process by funding Mutual Aid Associations (MAAs) that, as a proxy for the state, link newcomers with housing, employment, and bilingual education. Through the mediation of the MAA, cultural diversity becomes a personal asset to be leveraged rather than a disadvantage to be overcome. Eventually, individuals and their families would complete the process of spatial assimilation by relocating into higher-income and more diversified neighborhoods, where their children would benefit from a higher degree of identification with the host society.¹⁰³ Over the course of his extraordinary career, Silverman repeatedly witnessed the realization of this trajectory, especially among the Asian and Eastern European refugees of the Cold War. His belief in the generalizability of this integration model was also informed by the work of migration scholars such as Alejandro Portes, who draws on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social capital to explain the functionality of enclaves as structural formations that direct the flow of resources.¹⁰⁴ Transnational networks support newcomers who

¹⁰² Park and Burgess, *Introduction to The Science of Sociology*, 735: "Assimilation is a process of interpenetration and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitudes of other persons and groups and, by sharing their experience and history, are incorporated into the mainstream of American life."

¹⁰³ Milton Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964); Alba and Nee, "Rethinking Assimilation Theory for a new Era of Immigration," *International Migration Review* 31, no. 4 (1997): 826–74.

¹⁰⁴ Alejandro Portes, "Social Capital: Its Origins and Applications in Modern Sociology," *Annual Review of Sociology* 24 (1998): 1–24; Alejandro Portes and Robert D. Manning, "The Immigrant Enclave: Theory

provide the cheap labor and capital so critical to immigrant self-employment. However, they may also monopolize those opportunities within local hierarchies, reinforcing broader patterns of social stratification.¹⁰⁵ Much of this literature assumes that the removal of structural barriers would permit the more equitable distribution of capital within a market economy.¹⁰⁶

However, while I encountered elements of Silverman’s aspirational narrative during my fieldwork, it was difficult to locate my informants according to any consistent schema of embeddedness. Amina and I met while working at a mutual aid association that assisted African immigrants with legal and logistical challenges. Refugees, who were entitled to support during their first few months of arrival in the United States, often lived in neighborhoods with relatively high concentrations of African immigrants. However, many of our clients drove into the city from the suburbs or towns where they were in the minority. In fact, choice of residence did not appear to correlate in any consistent way with length of time in the country, nor did location have any bearing on my informants’ relationships with other Africans. Wherever they lived, they stayed in touch with their local contacts just as they did with family and friends in Africa: through phone calls, visits, and social media. Many were self-employed as drivers, movers, traders, and consultants—jobs that required mobility throughout the city and sometimes to other cities and abroad. Hair braiders and shops specializing in Africana were strategically located in African American neighborhoods rather than in enclaves.¹⁰⁷ These patterns of work may partially

and Empirical Examples,” in *Inequality: Classic Readings in Race, Class and Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

¹⁰⁵ Alejandro Portes, “Migration, Development, and Segmented Assimilation: A Conceptual Review of the Evidence,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 610 (2007): 73–97.

¹⁰⁶ Alejandro Portes, *Migration, Development, and Segmented Assimilation*; Ronald S. Burt, “The Network Structure of Social Capital,” *Organizational Behavior* 22 (2000): 345–423.

¹⁰⁷ My observations were consistent with findings that West and Central African immigrants are likely to be self-employed, often expanding on entrepreneurial experience in communities of origin. Irma T. Elo et al., “Africans in the American Labor Market,” *Demography* 52, no. 5 (2011): 1513–42; Baffour K. Takyi,

account for the tendency among African immigrants not to rely on co-location to the same degree as many other immigrant groups.¹⁰⁸ Yet I knew factory workers, janitors, and college professors who drove from other states to attend community events; indeed, skilled professionals were among the most visible participants, perhaps because they had more money to spread around.

I could not correlate class and mobility among my informants because it was difficult to gauge their socioeconomic status. Investments abroad might require a modest lifestyle in the United States, and African professional credentials often went unrecognized. Migrants with PhDs hampered by unemployment and successful *commerçants* with only Koranic schooling might be members of the same family. Many doctors, lawyers, professors, and religious leaders were able to achieve professional status, often by entering the country through a degree program that provided a pathway to permanent job placement. However, others were sidetracked even as they sought to stay that course. My observations did coincide with Silverman's with regard to the problem of high expectations. People who arrived with fixed career goals did seem to have a more difficult time adapting to life in the United States than those with lesser credentials who were more improvisational in their approach. Indeed, higher education often entailed expectations that discouraged entrepreneurialism, as Oscar expressed with some bitterness:

When I was ten, I went to the city to study. My brother went to Nigeria with my uncle to sell electronics. He had to hand over all his profits until he was old enough to set up his own business. It was my job to learn and then give it all back for the rest of my life.

"Africans Abroad: Comparative Perspectives on America's Postcolonial West Africans," in *The New African Diaspora*, ed. I. Okpewho and N. Nzegwu (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 249; and Randall Kekoa Quinones Akee et al., *The Persistence of Self-Employment Across Borders: New Evidence on Legal Immigrants to the United States*, (IZA Institute of Labor Economics, Working Paper 3250, December, 2007).

¹⁰⁸ See Maude Toussaint-Comeau, "Self-employed Immigrants: An Analysis of Recent Data," *Chicago Fed Letter*, no. 213 (April 2005).

Oscar had worked as an accountant in Benin. When I met him, he had just completed a program in his field at a community college, studying familiar material in order to earn a local credential. Now he was having trouble finding a suitable job. Likewise, Claude learned English from international missionaries and began university in Kinshasa. He was working for an international NGO when political unrest forced him to leave his country. Yet when family obligations interrupted a master's program, he suffered years of unemployment after failing to get a foothold in his field. This was a story I heard many times during my fieldwork.

The pervasive mismatch between skill and opportunity among migrants is a prevalent theme in the literature on African migration. It has been called “brain waste,” an ironic complement to the “brain drain” that deprives Africa of human resources.¹⁰⁹ Unable to realize their potential at home, migrants attempt to realize their human capital elsewhere, only to run into segmented labor markets caused by language barriers, lack of immigration status, or racial discrimination.¹¹⁰ These structural barriers channel transnational migrants into specific forms of employment as part of an international division of labor that derives local gains from global

¹⁰⁹ Frédéric Docquier and Hillel Rapoport, “Globalization, Brain Drain, and Development,” *Journal of Economic Literature* 50, no. 3 (2012): 681–730. Min Zhou, “Segmented Assimilation: Issues, Controversies, and Recent Research on the New Second Generation,” in *The Handbook of International Migration: The American Experience*, ed. Charles Hirschman et al., (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1999), 196–211; Jeanne Batalova et al., *Untapped Talent: The Costs of Brain Waste among Highly Skilled Immigrants in the United States* (Washington DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2016); Economists have dismissed the problem of “brain waste” as statistically insignificant. However, the statistical databases on which they rely, such as the American Community Survey sample, do not accurately capture data on noncitizens. John Gibson and David McKenzie, “Eight Questions about Brain Drains,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 25, no. 3 (2011): 107–28.

¹¹⁰ Michael J. Piore, *Birds of Passage: Migrant Labor and Industrial Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Folker Froebel et al., *The New International Division of Labor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); Saskia Sassen, *The Mobility of Labor and Capital: A Study in International Investment and Labor Flow* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Aristide Zolberg, “Bounded States in a Global Market: The Uses of International Labor Migrations,” in *Social Theory for a Changing Society*, ed. P. Bourdieu and J.S. Coleman (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991); and Stephen Castles et al., *The Age of Migration: Population Movements in the Modern World*, 5th ed. (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014).

inequalities.¹¹¹ Whatever their degree of formal education, the vast majority of my informants had gendered occupations that were overwhelmingly performed by migrants. Jean-Paul, who had trained as a pilot in Africa, acquiesced to life-threatening factory work in his single-minded pursuit of a pilot's license in the U.S. Sylvie worked in a nursing home during the day and cleaned offices at night, though she was trained as a teacher in Congo. Nadine, who had a degree in French literature, worked as a live-in nanny for a wealthy family. Amina's ambitions to become a social worker were limited to informal counseling as long as she could earn enough from hair braiding and retail sales to meet her obligations. Only when these businesses were no longer viable did she find education the most practical alternative. "I really love teaching," Idrissa told me when he heard that I was pursuing a PhD. He was a biology professor when a coup forced him to leave Burkina Faso in 1987.

The first thing I did when I got here was to go back to school. I was a substitute teacher in the Chicago Public Schools for a while. But it's hard to work and study at the same time, especially when you have people counting on you. That's why you see so many of us driving around like this. You think I want to be driving around in a cab? You can get stuck in a taxi, let me tell you.

Was Idrissa's career the casualty of postcolonial politics, a poorly functioning labor market, inadequate integration policies, or the depredations of global capital? Idrissa had his opinions regarding the forces that were shaping his life, but he expressed more bitterness about the conspiratorial entanglements of "Francafrique" than his own professional disappointments.¹¹² Narcisse, who had fled war in Côte d'Ivoire, was less concerned with politics than with managing the challenges of a double life as a gay man and a Muslim. For her part, Amina was

¹¹¹ See Mary Beth Mills, "Gender and Inequality in the Global Labor Force," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 32 (2003): 41–62; Arlie Russel Hochschild, "Global Care Chains and Emotional Surplus Value," in ed. W. Hutton and A. Giddens, *Global Capitalism* (New York: New Press, 2000), 130–46.

¹¹² I discuss "Francafrique," French involvement in postcolonial African politics, in Chapter 3.

preoccupied with the determination among African men to control women's lives. Loathe to complain, Sylvie reserved her disapproval for community members who did not share their resources as they should. Though my informants generally agreed that we share an unequal social landscape, they were far from agreement about the grounds of stratification.

What was the difference that made a difference? My informants connected across lines of ethnicity, class, and religion; many spoke three or more African languages, whether or not they were fluent in French or English. Professionals introduced me to illiterate traders. Muslims and Christians braided hair together. Catholics who spoke no English attended English Pentecostal services with multilingual friends. At the same time, unflattering stereotypes also circulated. "We've got nicknames," confided a Congolese friend of mine. "In Lingala we call West Africans *Ndingari*, which means they never stay in one place. The Rwandans and Ugandans, they call us 'Bling Bling,' because we like to show off. Nigerians are Ninjas because they're players, so you've got to watch out." Martine, a hair braider from Benin, complained that people love to complain. "You have a Senegalese party and they're pushing food at you, a Malien party and they're fighting over who gets to take home the leftovers. The Ivoriens will charge you to get into a party, and they won't so much as give you something to drink!" Stéphane, a computer programmer from Côte d'Ivoire, told me that he avoided his co-nationals because they were so suspicious of each other, which made him suspicious of them. "It's not the country I left," he lamented. "There's no more green space after all those people came into the city." Memories of civil war, political struggles, and xenophobia were never far from the surface, though people were usually uncomfortable bringing them up directly. They preferred to talk about the prejudices of others or dwell on personal betrayals. "I've learned the hard way that everyone

wants to be a big man,” said Alfonse, who had been a political prisoner in Congo. “They expect to climb on the backs of their brothers the way they do at home.”

I was often told that “the African community” had to look after itself. What was the criteria of membership? Marième and Khalifa opened their restaurant in 1995 to serve “the community” just as growing numbers of African migrants were settling in the Chicago area. Khalifa had wanted to call it *Chez Mbamba* to honor his brotherhood, but settled on *L’Africain* instead. “I am Wolof, I am Mouride, I am Senegalese, but above all I am African,” he told me. If his statement has the ring of an advertising slogan, it also invokes the anthropological model of segmentary social organization. “The tendency towards fusion is inherent in the segmentary character of Nuer political structure,” writes E. E. Evans-Pritchard in his monograph on the Nuer of South Sudan. “For although any group tends to split into opposed parts these parts must tend to fuse in relation to other groups, since they form part of a segmentary system.”¹¹³ Thirty years later, Aidan Southall argued that these “segments” were a reflection of the classification scheme itself, even when they were taken up by the people being described.

In all ways, the close identity of language, culture and society (if it ever existed) is now blurred and has become a series of alternatives. To say ‘I am a Kikuyu, a Kenyan, an African’, means three very different things. The latter two identities did not exist three quarters of a century ago.¹¹⁴

That my informants found it so significant to call themselves “African” challenges certain theoretical tendencies in migration studies. First, the very term “transnationalism” indicates a

¹¹³ Technically speaking, a segmentary descent group is one in which close kin come together in opposition to more distant kin, and distant kin against outsiders. The classic account of a segmentary society is E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1940), 148.

¹¹⁴ Like the network, the “tribe” was a form that named itself without reference to a reality outside. Aidan W. Southall, “The Illusion of Tribe,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 5, no. 1 (1970): 28–50.

methodological nationalism that presupposes the primacy of the nation-state.¹¹⁵ It is true that informants who were active in politics in their countries of origin, like Idrissa, often talked about migration in national terms. This was also often the case for people from countries that were in civil conflict—DRC, Côte d’Ivoire, and Mali—during my fieldwork. With these exceptions, however, my informants were less likely to identify themselves with their national origin than with other people, wherever they happened to be, and the specific places associated with their own past lives. Second, methodological individualists tend to assume that migration maximizes either personal or household utility without considering contradictory demands and the indeterminacy of outcomes. The notion that a migrant’s “human capital” is either realized or squandered disregards the plasticity of personhood, which is constituted through the negotiation of obligations, personal agency, and the vagaries of desire.

The divergence of perspectives that I encountered was partially the effect of my research methods. Because I did not limit my unit of inquiry to a particular national origin or ethnic group, neighborhood, occupation, or gender, a common ground of identification was not built into my observational frame. However, as Southall points out, “The contingent nature of structure, subdivisions and boundaries is of their essence, not something to be swept away by penetrating analysis.”¹¹⁶ As I sought out “patterns that connect” in scattered observations, I noticed that inconsistency could itself indicate a kind of pattern. Chicago is a city of neighborhoods and immigrant enclaves. What make Africans different? There is a vibrant “Little Africa” in Upper Manhattan. Why did their choice of location in Chicago seem so random?

¹¹⁵ See Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller, “Methodological Nationalism, the Social Sciences, and the Study of Migration: An Essay in Historical Epistemology,” *International Migration Review* 37, no. 3 (2003): 576–610; and Oliver Bakewell, “‘Keeping Them in Their Place’: The Ambivalent Relationship between Development and Migration in Africa,” *Third World Quarterly* 29, no. 7 (2008): 1341–58.

¹¹⁶ Southall, “The Illusion of Tribe,” 41.

While newcomers to New York City must rely on networks to find a place to live, housing in Chicago is abundant and relatively affordable. Chicago is also one of the most racially segregated cities in the United States.¹¹⁷ Some of my informants moved to white suburbs or downstate because they thought it would be a safer place to raise children; others lived around African Americans because they found racism to be a greater threat.¹¹⁸ Each option held its special challenges and benefits in the form of strategic relationships that arbitrated boundaries of culture and race. Wherever they lived, however, they feared for the safety of their children.

Thus, opposing decisions resulted from the same conundrum: the misfit of the black immigrant in a racial order in which upward mobility is associated with whiteness. This is an example of what Gregory Bateson called a double bind: “Every move which he makes is the common-sense move in the situation as he correctly sees it at that moment, but his every move is subsequently demonstrated to have been wrong by the moves which other members of the system make in response to his ‘right’ move.”¹¹⁹ They are damned if they do and damned if they don’t. A few of my informants embraced an acculturation trajectory that involved distancing themselves from other Africans. Narcisse lived in an LGBTQ-friendly neighborhood on the North Side, where he worked as a sommelier at an upscale restaurant. He had moved to Chicago, he told me, because in New York there were “too many Africans” who would disapprove of his lifestyle.¹²⁰ Hawa, an undergraduate at an elite university, migrated with her family from Senegal

¹¹⁷ See Robert J. Sampson, *Great American City: Chicago and the Enduring Neighborhood Effect* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

¹¹⁸ See Samantha Friedman et al., “Race, Immigrants, and Residence: A New Racial Geography of Washington, DC,” *Geographical Review* 95, no. 2 (2005).

¹¹⁹ Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), 241.

¹²⁰ Matthew Thomann defines “branché” as a coded term used by sexual and gender minorities in Côte d’Ivoire to describe themselves and each other. Matthew Thomann, *The Price of Inclusion: Sexual Subjectivity, Violence, and the Nonprofit Industrial Complex in Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire* (PhD diss., American University, 2014), 72–104, 160. See Chapter 3.

when she was eleven years old to a small town in Pennsylvania where they were the only black family she knew. “They didn’t want us to wind up like my cousins in New York,” she said ruefully. Similarly, Jacques moved his family to a small town with a “perfect school system” and pervasive racial stereotyping. His sister Marianne, who lived in an African American neighborhood, thought that this decision was related to the atrocities he had witnessed in Burundi. “He escaped his country because he passed as Tutsi,” she told me. “Perhaps that is why he has chosen to live in an environment in which he cannot pass as white.” However, more of my informants chose to be an ethnic minority in the black community than racial minorities in primarily white neighborhoods. In addition, though most of my informants were married to other Africans, American spouses were more likely to be black.

Almost everyone had something to say about learning to be black in America. Cultural theorist Manthia Diawara entitled his 2003 memoir after a popular song by Malian afro-pop singer Salif Keita, “Nous Pas Bouger” (We Won’t Budge), which expresses a solidarity among Africans in the West as a consequence of the shared experience of racism. “Sometimes I listen to it while riding in a taxi or on the subway in Paris to give myself a sense of belonging,” he writes.¹²¹ As an undocumented immigrant in Washington DC during the 1970s, Diawara juggled layers of identification—Soninke, Malian, African, francophone, black, and immigrant—in order to avert hostility as he gained a foothold in a strange world. “I found my Africa in America,” he recalls, only to lose it again repeatedly in the disorientation of differential treatment and harassment, homesickness, the demands of Malian relatives, and a generalized *anomie* of cultural displacement.¹²² Echoing Franz Fanon, Diawara describes his experience of blackness as both a

¹²¹ Manthia Diawara, *We Won’t Budge: An African Exile in the World* (New York: Civitas Books, 2003), 45.

¹²² Diawara, 233.

positive discovery of mutual recognition and a negative break in the “corporal schema” that anchors the self to the body and the body to the world.¹²³ This “atmosphere of certain uncertainty” permeated my informants’ accounts of racial self-consciousness. As Claude recalled, university employment did not prevent campus police from asking him for identification on a regular basis. Oscar described an interview with an accountant who was easing into retirement and was looking for a partner to pick up the slack. They really seemed to hit it off until the older man explained that he could never hire an African because “my clients just wouldn’t be comfortable.” When I was working with Amina on the summer festival circuit, customers routinely eyed her as they entered her booth and then asked me for help. “Am I too visible or invisible?” Amina remarked.

Nevertheless, similar experiences did not invite the same interpretations. At a symposium among college students and their African parents, the young people seem to struggle with racial identity; the older people with racism. “I don’t feel comfortable being called an African American,” admitted one young man who had emigrated with his parents from Nigeria when he was twelve. “If you know who I am and what my place-name is, then you must address me specifically.” Another young man who had been born in the United States expressed a plastic sense of identity: “Actively identifying myself as an African definitely represents a choice about my future, and caring about the well-being of my country, but when I’m here I’m black.” When one parent distinguished African migrants from African Americans, emphasizing that, “they came here because of slavery; they have been defined by the color of their skin,” a young woman retorted that identifying with black Americans was a matter of political solidarity. Another parent

¹²³ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. by Charles Lam Markmann (Boston: Grove Press, 1967), 110–11.

pointed out that colonialism and the slave trade were part of the same history: “Everyone outside sees us as part of the same community, and we shouldn't waste time fighting over that.” A linguist from Côte d’Ivoire with a university position, he pointed out that this debate was part of what it meant to be African today. “Migrating does not mean we have left Africa. The way we live here in our families is part of our African culture.”

Identity is practice, he was saying. It is fluid, situational, relational. It may gather in a name, a place, and a time together. But it is most evident when there is difference and boundaries emerge. Thus, Zain Abdullah describes how the creation of “Muslim space” helps West Africans in New York City cope with the stigma of blackness, and Cheik Anta Babou describes how the expansion of the hair braiding industry has attenuated hierarchies of gender and caste as West Africans adapt to life in the diaspora.¹²⁴ These boundaries are not the limits of a defined collective; they are points of intransitivity at which conflicting interests “cut the network.”¹²⁵ Any form of possession has this effect insofar as it limits access to a resource. Belonging to a Sufi brotherhood or owning a business are two of any number of ways in which persons assert a difference that makes a difference.¹²⁶ By gathering disparate elements within a form of being together, leaders manage the flow of resources. They accumulate and distribute capital by building dams and creating tributaries. If they maintain the appearance of fairness and inclusion, the stratification that results may be perceived as a structure of opportunity, however unequal the distribution of benefits. This ambivalence characterizes all relations of belonging. State, family,

¹²⁴ See Cheikh Anta Babou, “Migration and Cultural Change: Money, ‘Caste,’ Gender, and Social Status among Senegalese Female Hair Braiders in the United States,” *Africa Today* 55, no. 2 (2009); and Zain Abdullah, *Black Mecca: The African Muslims of Harlem* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹²⁵ Marilyn Strathern, “Cutting the Network,” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 2, no. 3 (1996): 517–35.

¹²⁶ Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology*, 271–72.

and community are expressions of membership that are simultaneously open and closed, threatening exclusion and inviting arbitrage.

Having come into contact through the mediations of global capitalism and random circumstance, my informants and I encountered each other immediately. Like Simmel's "potential wanderer," we were simultaneously neighbors and strangers, potentially familiar yet suspect and truly at home, perhaps, only in the memory of being with others elsewhere. The temporality of this ambivalent relation—the emergence in the present of a future possibility that has yet to determine the meaning of the past—is the logic of optionality, which derives value from the capacity to make future decisions. "Although he has not moved on," writes Simmel, "[the Stranger] has not quite overcome the freedom of coming and going."¹²⁷ That freedom comes at the price of uncertainty, a risk that my informants hedge by participating in a moral economy of mutual aid. Though these relations may not always bear the weight of their commitments, gossip and reputational standards sustain expectations of reciprocity, even as they justify inequalities. On a greater scale, however, the inequalities that have motivated the decision to migrate no longer require political justification. They are the consequence of the global transfer of risk by those who hold all the options into the lives of people who can only respond by creating options of their own.¹²⁸ No wonder my informants, acting every day as black migrants in the United States, resisted viewing stratification as an entitlement denied. Better to

¹²⁷ Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, 402.

¹²⁸ Richard Breen contrasts the "contingent asymmetric commitments" of optionality to hedging strategies, which distributes risk more symmetrically. This distinction does not hold, however, if hedging as well as risk transfer is understood in terms of optionality. For Robert Meister, optionality is the temporal indeterminacy of any deferred decision. See Richard Breen, "Risk, Recommodification and Stratification," *Sociology* 31, no. 3 (1997): 473–89; and Robert Meister, *Justice as an Option* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).

approach it as practical problem of diversity that might itself be leveraged into a form of integration.

Gift/Commodity

It wasn't easy to go home. In 2012 and again in 2013, Amina and I traveled with huge suitcases full of merchandise to sell through her contacts in Dakar and Bamako. The Great Recession had gutted her retail profits, and that summer, business on the festival circuit was so bad that she decided to liquidate part of her inventory abroad. Like in Chicago, Amina was constantly on her cell phone, arranging appointments and giving advice to family and friends. Yet in Africa, the pace of everyday life also allowed for more face-to-face contact during a meal, a deal of some kind, or merely a brief exchange of news over a glass of strong tea or café Touba. People shared information differently in person, Amina told me. They were less prone to embellishment.

It soon became evident that cash was just as tight in Dakar as in Chicago. People were receiving less money from abroad, and because a new government had just taken charge, civil servants weren't getting paid. Everywhere we went we saw people selling the same commodities not only in markets but also in living rooms, street corners, the side of the road. There was plenty of bustling activity but no one seemed to be buying anything. Walking through the Ashlam market in Dakar, we kept seeing items identical to Amina's on sale. We were also waylaid by people from Amina's past. One afternoon, an old woman asked about her son in Chicago, whom she had not seen in fifteen years because he had no prospects for obtaining a green card. "Will I see him before I die?" she beseeched me in Wolof, as though I could do something to influence my country's government in this matter. She entrusted us with a letter for him, and Amina sold her some skin cream.

Was Amina altruistic or opportunistic? She could be generous and cooperative, shrewd and uncompromising at the same time. Many of her fashions, costume jewelry, and perfume became gifts for her family and friends. Yet as a buyer, she never paid more than she thought an object was worth, and she did not do business with people she didn't know. When it became clear that she would barely recoup her travel costs, Amina arranged to sell a portion of her present and future inventory to Lat, a cousin who was also one of her mother's tenants. Having migrated from his village near the Malian border, Lat had found work at a Coca-Cola bottling plant and was saving capital to start a family business. Lat's generous advance solved Amina's cash flow problem, although it was questionable that his sister, who had already opened a shop in the countryside, would have a better time breaking even. As long as he had a job, he was likely to follow through on his commitment, and not only because he was family. He needed to safeguard his relationship with Mama Niang, Amina's mother, in order to keep his room in a tight housing market.

This was the other side of Bintu's *sabaar*. That evening in Chicago, the dancers had performed a commitment to Bintu and to each other that would ostensibly persist beyond the ritual demands of the moment. They sealed the circle with their dollar bills, symbolic property that "cut the network" by establishing privileged ties of debt and obligation.¹²⁹ They were blessing her with their social labor and investing themselves with *baraka*, or spiritual prosperity. In Africa, goods changed hands with credit arrangements that might never be resolved. The trust that was built through the honoring of those debts was worth more than the commodities themselves. Yet that trust also created a platform for transactional relations. Through agreements both tacit and contractual, they were generating "cosmologies of credit" that suspended the

¹²⁹ Marilyn Strathern, "Cutting the Network," 531.

instantaneous means-ends utility of market exchange in favor of an extended temporality more sensitive to the booms and busts of mobility.¹³⁰ Like the aspiring migrants of Fuzhu in Julie Chu's ethnography, Africans were caught up in the movement of people, money, and things in ways that exceeded worldly calculation.

Having arrived in Senegal only two weeks before us, Bintu served us tea and beignets on her mother-in-law's patio and shared her plans. She was making food to sell on the street while her husband looked for work; the money they had raised for their restaurant was being spent on her mother's cancer treatment. Bintu's family was in Saint Louis. "I want to be with her," she told us, "but I'm needed here." Her primary obligation was to her husband and his parents, who had no one else to cook and clean for them. Amina gave Bintu a quantity of earrings to sell, and they talked about setting up a combination boutique-café. Bintu's husband and brother-in-law had rented four minivans for transporting pilgrims to Touba for the Grand Magal. Did we want to go? Although Amina had no interest in the spectacle of Mouridism, she urged me to go ahead. But under what pretext?

In my clumsy attempts to behave appropriately in the field, I struggled with the distinction, often implicit, between a commodity and a gift. Neither my curiosity nor my expertise was adequate rationale for my presence at the Grand Magal. What are the intentions of a nonbeliever at a religious festival? Was I a personal guest, a tourist, or a potential convert? It seemed to depend on how I spent my money. Bintu's family declined my offer to pay for transportation, so I bought a sheep from a Fulani herder who kept his flock on the side of the

¹³⁰ "By speaking of 'cosmologies of credit' rather than 'cosmologies of capitalism,' I aim to move beyond an examination of value production as accumulation, growth, or surplus to a broader inquiry into credit-able practices that include such activities as the personal assumption of loss and the collective generation of karmic debt and its repayment." Julie Y. Chu, *Cosmologies of Credit: Transnational Mobility and the Politics of Destination in China* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

road just outside Mbacke. Although I couldn't watch the men kill the animal, the meat was my gift to Bintu's family. Or was it exchange for the gift of their hospitality?

"The hardest thing about going home," Bintu remarked, "is that they all think you're rich. There's no way you can convince them otherwise." At the Grand Magal, the contrary intention was on display, as Mourides gathered from throughout the diaspora to share their wealth (*addiya*) with their marabouts. In 2013 this annual festival drew a million visitors, doubling the city's population for about a week. Closed to traffic, broad streets had transformed into a market with a carnival atmosphere. People were playing lottery games and vendors were hawking their wares. Groups of men were playing drums and people were dancing. Speakers boomed Chant Beifal. Bintu and I met Khalifa at Lamp Fall, the minaret that is the *axis mundi* of the Mouride universe. "Is there some big event that draws all these people?" I asked him.¹³¹ "This is the event," he exclaimed, spreading his arms wide. "We are the event. It's everyone coming together to feast, dance, and pray."

We were directed to take off our shoes before stepping foot on the vast apron of white marble surrounding the Great Mosque. Separated into gendered lines, we were rushed through the building towards the threshold of Serigne Mbamba's tomb, where the women reached up to touch the lintel, pushing and shoving happily as they threw coins over the railing. Back on the central square, Khalifa was purchasing hand-crafted wooden pendants on rawhide strings. These amulets were for his children in Chicago. He would tie them around their waists, he explained, under their clothes, as protection against bad luck and the envy of others. Though these *fétiches* were purchased like any commodity, their power emanated from their value as gift and

¹³¹ For an introduction to the unique history and geography of the holy city of Touba, see Eric Ross, "Touba: A Spiritual Metropolis in the Modern World," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 29, no. 2 (1995): 222–59.

guarantee, a promise that functioned as a security against resentment. Khalifa and Marième were teaching their children that the privileges of their American life were not free; good fortune entailed obligations that must be fulfilled.

What kind of business was the Grand Magal? We stopped to eat at a hostel that was run by a woman who had just returned to Senegal after ten years abroad. Fama's story paralleled Amina's: She had gone to New York for college but dropped out after a year because she couldn't justify paying tuition when she could be earning a living for herself and her family. She had operated a hair-braiding shop for three years, then got married and sold things on the festival circuit until her husband decided he wanted to settle down in Norfolk, Virginia. When the 2008 Recession hit, he lost his job, and she brought her children home to Africa. "My husband wouldn't come back," she laughed. "Now I have to send *him* money. I make enough money renting rooms during the Magal to last all year!" Like Amina, Fama managed the exchange of money in a way that seemed more personal than commercial. Pilgrims paid what they could and food was distributed equally. On the other hand, she had just put out a group of young men who were taking advantage of her hospitality. How did she make that judgment? "I know people," she replied.

"He who tells you to give away your property deserves your thanks," goes a Wolof proverb. Supplicants should demand the donor's excess, to which they are entitled. The gratitude of the recipient motivates a return gift, completing the circle and allowing for its repetition. Yet the donor should also be grateful for the privilege of sharing, which confers status by engendering social substance. Gratitude is critical to this formulation: A gift that is exchanged under coercion would constitute theft on the part of the supplicant and create resentment on the part of the donor. The gift is an obligation that must be freely offered and received in order to

produce trust and solidarity. Thus, the gift is a paradox. “One gives because one is compelled to do so, because the recipient possesses some kind of right of propriety over anything that belongs to the donor,” wrote Marcel Mauss. “This ownership is expressed and conceived of as a spiritual bond.”¹³² Is this “spiritual bond” an ideology, a form of misrecognition that obscures the expectation of return?

This spiritual bond is produced by the paradox of the free gift. Gifts were to Mauss what ritual was to his uncle Durkheim, a “total social fact” that expresses the essence of a given society. Taking up the dualism of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, Mauss modeled this moral economy of intertwined “juridical, economic, religious, and even aesthetic” phenomena in opposition to the functionally differentiated institutions of capitalist modernity.¹³³ His extensive readings in ethnology and history informed an evolutionary scheme that discerned the traces of archaic forms in contemporary institutions. Translating Durkheim’s *mana* of collective effervescence into the “*hau*” of the gift, he theorized the prehistory of Marx’s commodity fetish as a personified object that demands a return to its origins. People participate within gifts not only as partners to their exchange but also as the source of their potency as tokens of status.¹³⁴ Likewise, the gift—animated by the inalienable spirit of the giver—possesses agency in its capacity as a “general and enduring contract” that preserves the “system of total services.”¹³⁵ Reciprocity constitutes a higher law of social integration; the expectation of return does not

¹³² Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W.D. Halls, (London: Routledge, 1990), 17.

¹³³ Mauss, 101

¹³⁴ Mauss, 31. “Not only the bracelets and the necklaces, but even all the goods, ornaments, and weapons, everything that belongs to the partner, is so imbued with it, at least emotionally if not in his inmost soul, that they participate in the contract.” Here Mauss conceives of participation in the Platonic sense of having a part of the essence of a thing. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* trans. H. Tomlinson and G. Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 29–30.

¹³⁵ Mauss, *The Gift*, 7

contradict the symbolic valence of the act. Status is inseparable from wealth, and individuals do not have interests apart from the group. Thus, the original gift is by definition free; the contradiction only arises with the modern divergence of interest and disinterest, economics and law, value, and power.

The transition from gift to market is a common sense story in many critical histories of capitalism. It corresponds with the stages of development outlined by Marx in the *German Ideology* and was taken up by Karl Polanyi after World War II as a “great transformation” from embedded institutions to money-mediated relations among individuals.¹³⁶ From the standpoint of a global, networked present, this meta-narrative provides a compelling framework for conceptualizing capital accumulation, colonial domination, technological change, and systemic crisis. However, as Marx demonstrates in the *18th Brumaire*, a history is critical only insofar as its explanatory power cannot be taken for granted. Marx’s tragicomic treatment of French politics performs a model of storytelling that breaks up the cumulative authority of bourgeois historiography and disrupts the telos of revolution.¹³⁷ Polanyi likewise challenges the narrative of progress when he treats history as an effect rather than a cause of social organization. In his essay, “The Economy as Instituted Process,” he argues that institutions have “transcendental importance” in their capacity to invest “the interacting elements of nature and humanity” with unity, “a structure with a definite function in society.” In this way, the institution of market exchange appears as a transcendental form. However, the facts of anthropology and history identify the content of this form as an “instituting process” that gives rise to historically contingent structures. “The two root meanings of ‘economic,’ the substantive and the formal,

¹³⁶ Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, 43-55.

¹³⁷ Max Tomba, *Marx’s Temporalities* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2013), 35–59.

have nothing in common.”¹³⁸

But what is content without form, or history without direction? Polanyi replaces the market form with a “wider frame of reference” that reifies his typological forms of integration as social facts. Understanding history as process allows us to preserve Mauss’s model of the gift as an artifact while dismissing variants of his evolutionary paradigm that have come into question or dropped out of sight, such as Sir Henry Maine’s “whiggish” history of contract or Herbert Spencer’s Social Darwinism.¹³⁹ However, while the civilizing mission of liberal imperialism may have become a bankrupt vision of the future, progressive temporality persists in our relation to the past. The structure of narrative demands it. Like any real abstraction, our historical convictions depend on an unsustainable assertion of transcendental authority. Our present is shaped by the debts we acknowledge, and negotiations over repayment or deferral depend on the volatile politics of historical accounting. However carefully we critique the representation of representations describing the chronological emergence of today’s social forms, those forms remain the starting point for counter-chronological analysis, the backward glance through which we structure our theories. The present is the logical precondition for the past. In the same way, as Alfred Gell points out, the alienating exchange of commodities is the logical precondition for the gift.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ This statement parallels two statements cited in my introduction (p. 70), which also illustrate an operating dualism between form and content: “Any attempt to understand experience forces a separation of form and content, establishing a hierarchical relation of knowledge that disavows its own entailments. This is why Ben Lee can say that “the stochastic modeling of possibility does not apply to trading,” and Bourdieu can say that “the precepts of custom ... have nothing in common with the transcendent rules of a juridical code.”

¹³⁸ Karl Polanyi, “The Economy as Instituted Process,” in *Trade and Market in the Early Empires: Economics in History and Theory*, ed. K. Polanyi et al. (New York: Free Press, 1957), 243.

¹³⁹ Mauss’s emphasis on the conflation of persons and things, the absence of individuality, and the importance of status in gift societies reflects Maine’s characterization of ancient law, though he is not cited. Henry James Sumner Maine, *Ancient Law* (London: Murray, 1861).

¹⁴⁰ Alfred Gell, *The Anthropology of Time* (Oxford, UK: Berg, 1992), 263–74.

Anthropologists insisting on the distinction between gift and market exchange are projecting the former as a transcendental ideal from their capitalist position. Those heeding Polanyi's call for a substantivist approach to economy, for example, marshal evidence of cultural plurality against the formalist assumption that general-purpose money is a universal form of mediation. Yet insofar as this "wider frame of reference" is extrapolated in opposition to one of its parts, that plurality is no less formalistic. Marshall Sahlins elaborated on Polanyi's category of reciprocity by classifying pre-capitalist economies according to "ever-widening membership spheres." In this hierarchy of integration, Sahlins argues, a syllogistic relation between social distance and exchange determines the embedded third term of morality.¹⁴¹ Thus, people who live together share resources through generalized reciprocity, whereas competition is reserved for the "Alters" who are a resource for affinal marriage partners, external goods, and the status that accrues from debt. The relative sociality of these more extenuated relations range along a continuum from alliances characterized by the long-term toleration of asymmetrical benefits, to the haggling, gambling, and theft of negative reciprocity. Yet the true embedded third term of Sahlins's typology is the "more economic" form of balanced exchange in which "social relations hinge on the material flow," and moral obligation "cancels out" in no time.

Switching the analysis from social form to practice, attention turns from the history to the temporality of exchange. Pierre Bourdieu argues that the objective description of social form commits "the fallacy of the rule" by converting *ex post facto* generalizations into explanations of the behavior being described.¹⁴² Historicism succumbs to this temptation insofar as it disassociates consequences from the crucible of causes, which are themselves produced by lived

¹⁴¹ Marshall Sahlins, "On the Sociology of Primitive Exchange," in *Stone Age Economics* (Chicago: Aldine-Atherton, Inc., 1965), 185–275.

¹⁴² Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory*, 22–30.

practice in everyday life. History is the embodied residue of the past, constituting fields of possibility and constraint for social action in the present. In their efforts to approach sources objectively, positivist social scientists disavow their participation in the creation of these objects through the “habitus” of scientific method. This term had been taken up in its Aristotelian sense by Durkheim, Weber, and Mauss to designate learned dispositions of body and mind.¹⁴³

Bourdieu stresses the mediating function of *habitus* as a capacity to simultaneously internalize practical knowledge and externalize that knowledge through practices that structure social life. Rejecting the opposition between objectivism and subjectivism that had long stabilized research in the social sciences, Bourdieu’s “reflexive sociology” advocated a methodological shift from “the mechanics of the model to the dialectic of strategies” that can grasp the temporal uncertainty of being. Practice can’t be modeled, he argues, because models stop time by reducing contingent improvisations to rules that are generally followed. The sense of necessity is a retroactive response to the mastery of a situation; it is the result rather than the motivation of the behaviors observed by the ethnographer.

For Bourdieu, time is the medium of all exchange. The form of the transaction matters less than the ways in which the “holder of a transmissible power,” as possessor of monetary or symbolic capital, manipulates time in order manage his conditions of existence. The art of the exchange is in the interval between gift and counter-gift. Bourdieu generalizes that the counter-gift must be deferred and different: too soon and it is merely a swap, too late and it is a loan.¹⁴⁴ To err in either direction might cause offense, indicating a willingness to remain in debt to the donor, on one hand, or by looking like a leech. Yet this is not a rule governing all cases, but a

¹⁴³ Loic Wacquant, “A Concise Genealogy and Anatomy of Habitus,” *Sociological Review* 64 (2016): 64–72.

¹⁴⁴ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory*, 5.

generative scheme that applies only to an agent's practical relations in a particular situation.¹⁴⁵

Symbolic capital of honor arises when the act fits the circumstances. The clock and the calendar are “synoptic illusions” that attempt to capture as natural law what is immanent to the rhythms of material life: the seasonal changes of weather and the length of the day, as well as the ritual cycles that accompany them. Agricultural societies that live time in this way, as a present containing its past and future, have an intrinsic tendency to perpetuate themselves. Capitalist society, on the other hand, which makes time according to the empty, homogenous unit of the hour, generates a *habitus* that is detached from its own present. The objective representation of time alienates workers and scientists alike from the flow of their own production and undermines the formation of dense relations of trust. The temporal indeterminacy that is the source of an individual's creativity is externalized as the imminent threat of economic crisis.¹⁴⁶

Thus, temporal indeterminacy is what drives the dialectic of strategies to generate both the forms and the content of lived experience. Bourdieu is less interested in highly formalized rituals that break with the flow of everyday life than the “little presents” that ensure the continuity of interpersonal relations, “drawing the continuous out of the discontinuous, as mathematicians do, through infinite multiplication of the infinitely small.”¹⁴⁷ Nevertheless, he and Rappaport arrive at the same critique of Durkheim's elementary forms: that social action generates value not through rote repetition of order but by virtue of the possibility that the ritual will fail and disorder will follow. Bourdieu and Rappaport both understand society as a moving system in which agents create time through interactions that create the conditions for their own

¹⁴⁵ Bourdieu, 97–109.

¹⁴⁶ For a development of this idea with respect to financialization, see Lisa Adkins, “Practice as Temporalisation: Bourdieu and Economic Crisis,” in *The Legacy of Pierre Bourdieu: Critical Essays*, ed. S. Susan and B. S. Turner (London: Anthem Press, 2011).

¹⁴⁷ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory*, 7.

becoming. Rappaport's cultural ecology draws explicitly on Gregory Bateson's cybernetic theory, which conceives of information transfer as an evolutionary process of adaptation within a changing environment.¹⁴⁸ Bourdieu objects that such a focus on communication is inadequately attuned to structures of domination.¹⁴⁹ Yet he describes the *habitus* in similarly algorithmic terms, as "a self-regulating device programmed to redefine courses of action in accordance with information received on the reception of information transmitted and on the effects produced by that information."¹⁵⁰ The more significant divergence, perhaps, is that Bourdieu is exclusively concerned with the nature of society rather than a society of nature.

Notwithstanding his resistance to the dualities of Western thought, Bourdieu predicates his materialism on the strict separation of culture from nature. "With the Marx of the *Theses on Feurbach*, he writes, 'the theory of practice as practice insists, against positivist materialism, that the objects of knowledge are constructed, and against idealist intellectualism, that the principle of this construction is practical activity towards practical functions.'"¹⁵¹ Generations of Marxists have found inspiration in these fighting words, yet they hardly summarize Marx's dialectics of materialism. For Marx, nature operates within the system rather than outside it; indeed, it is nothing other than the internalized externality that is expressed through social action—what

¹⁴⁸ "That language permits thought and communication to escape from the solid actualities of here and now to discover other realms, for instance those of the possible, the plausible, the desirable, and the valuable, has already been emphasized. This was not quite correct. Language does not merely *permit* such thought but both requires it and *makes it inevitable*. Humanity is a species that lives and can only live in terms of meanings it itself must invent. These meanings and understandings not only reflect or approximate an independently existing world but participate in its very construction." Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 8. Also see Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, 279–308.

¹⁴⁹ "To reduce to the function of communication—albeit by the transfer of borrowed concepts—phenomena such as the dialectic of challenge and riposte and, more generally, the exchange of gifts, words, or women, is to ignore the structural ambivalence which predisposes them to fulfil a political function of domination in and through performance of the communication function." Bourdieu, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, 14.

¹⁵⁰ Bourdieu, 10–11.

¹⁵¹ Bourdieu, 96.

Bourdieu calls the *habitus*. What exists beyond consciousness is both the material of social creation and that element of indeterminacy that drives creative activity yet remains inaccessible to the creators. Bourdieu rejects Freud's theory of the unconscious as a form of secular metaphysics that naturalizes the structuring principle of social practice.¹⁵² Yet he has merely reinscribed that negation as a positive social process that is invisible to its own participants. For all his talk of strategy, Bourdieu's agents are most effective when as they act in instinctual response to the internalized structures that pattern practice, without explicit awareness of their full repertoire of options. Meanwhile, the mapping techniques of the reflexive sociologist require all the intentionality that ethnographic informants lack because they are immersed in a social order. With respect to gift exchange, for example, "the agents practise as irreversible a sequence of actions that the observer constitutes as reversible."¹⁵³ The practice, which includes the possibility of the failure of the counter-gift, could not operate if perceived in accordance with the model.

Yet in asserting this disparity of knowledge between the observer and the observed, Bourdieu attests to the status of *habitus* as a model. It is in this disavowal that Bourdieu's performance falters. Cybernetics demonstrate that models can move; the information technologies of contemporary finance and social media are constituted by them. Ultimately, as Gell pointed out, Bourdieu is reworking the classic sociological contrast between Tönnies's *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* as an opposition between lived and objectified temporalities.¹⁵⁴ Bourdieu remains committed to the goal of progressive understanding: "this sort of third-order

¹⁵² Bourdieu, 27.

¹⁵³ Bourdieu, 5.

¹⁵⁴ Gell, *The Anthropology of Time*, 286–93. Like Gell, Munn resists the assumption of a radical difference between Western and non-Western thought. See Nancy D. Munn, "The Cultural Anthropology of Time: A Critical Essay," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 21 (1992): 112–13.

knowledge does not cancel out the gains from objectivist knowledge but conserves and transcends them by integrating the truth of practical experience and of the practical mode of knowledge which this learned knowledge had to be constructed against, that is to say, inseparably, the truth of all learned knowledge.”¹⁵⁵ As Bourdieu acknowledges here, reflexivity is itself a transcendental move. This version of dialectical synthesis swallows the indeterminacy of nature as a social fact, explicable as habitus and recognizable to the analyst as a “structuring structure.” An awareness of the dialectic—Bourdieu’s “epistemological reflection”—is not in itself dialectical: to occupy the contradiction itself would problematize the durability of any generalizations at all.

“It is an enchanted, perverted, topsy-turvy world,” wrote Marx, “in which Monsieur le Capital and Madame la Terre do their ghost-walking as social characters and at the same time directly as mere things.”¹⁵⁶ The marriage of capital and nature drives a “topsy turvy world” that pulls even the critic into its circuit. In *Capital*, Marx renders this paradoxical movement—through which both social relations and material things are both abstractly represented and actively concrete—from a position of enunciation that is always shifting within the text. This “immanent critique” is not easy to discern and is overshadowed at times by brilliant bursts of polemic. As compelling as they are, however, Marx’s expressions of outrage are only one facet of a narrative written from the standpoint of no standpoint, which is capital, a shape-shifting force that is not only reflexively self-determining but also recursively self-determined by its own transformations. As anyone who has read Hegel knows, a contradictory position of enunciation is a losing proposition for a writer who wants to be read. To the extent that Marx succeeded in this

¹⁵⁵ Bourdieu, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, 4.

¹⁵⁶ Karl Marx, *Capital, A Critique of Political Economy. Volume III*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Penguin, 1981), 953–70.

endeavor he has been also been misread, with world-historical consequences.

This is the problem that gives Simmel's work its episodic and aphoristic quality. The Stranger is a figural embodiment of knowledge that cannot transcend but only reconfigure the indeterminacy of knowledge itself. Thus, it is understandable that Bourdieu, like Polanyi, should reserve for himself a wider frame of reference, scrutinizing the self-contained community from the alienation of the network. Yet insofar as agents are always embedded in a *habitus*, there is no Stranger in Bourdieu's worldview, save as individuals accumulating and mobilizing symbolic capital across borders.¹⁵⁷

In many ways, Bourdieu's logic of practice is a powerful heuristic for approaching my fieldwork. As Amina remarked when we first arrived in Dakar, time on the other side of the Atlantic had an elastic quality that seemed to vary in duration and intensity depending on how it was used. Bursts of activity—running errands, shopping, dancing in nightclubs—were interspersed with visits of varying length that often involved the making and drinking of *attaya*. Men were particularly fond of making this bitter black tea, with close attention to our facial expressions as we took the first sip. Michael Ralph argues that this performance of skill and discernment indexes the value of time being squandered in unemployment.¹⁵⁸ It also constitutes a routine ritual practice for building and sustaining the communal ties, old and new, which are the primary vector for opportunity. My presence often converted these informal gatherings into impromptu strategy sessions about actual or potential migrations. I was also courted assertively by erstwhile suitors and milked for information on U.S. immigration law by their parents, siblings, and friends. This reflected a *habitus*, observed by many ethnographers in contemporary

¹⁵⁷ Jaeun Kim, "Ethnic Capital, Migration, and Citizenship: A Bourdieusian Perspective," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 42, no. 3 (2019): 357–85.

¹⁵⁸ Michael Ralph, *Forensics of Capital* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 117–36.

Africa, in which young emigrants serve as a critical source of seed capital for extended families, who manage the emigrant's interests *in absentia* and even raise their children abroad.¹⁵⁹ Mama Niang was caring for her daughter Fatou's six-year-old son and was looking forward to taking on her younger son when he turned three. Likewise, Amina's three sons had spent four years with their grandmother while Amina juggled three jobs in New York, accumulating the cash to buy a house in Dakar spacious enough to accommodate all of them, as well as rent-paying tenants.

Wherever they happened to be, my informants were continually called upon to share their resources. This was most obviously expressed in the remittances that feed cash-starved economies and the immigration petitions for family members to join them abroad. "It is a privilege to share!" my friend Marianne insisted. "I have helped each of my brothers and sisters get to college, and then they have come, one at a time. When my husband and I get paid, we don't even *start* budgeting until we have set aside our mothers' part. And when we make more money, we send them more because we know that she will give it all away before spending a penny on themselves." Marianne's sacrifices for her large family in war-torn Burundi had a significant impact due to her regular income as a college professor. "I never had a choice but to succeed, for them," she told me. Others had fewer resources and less patience, however, for the never-ending requests for assistance from home. "How do you say no?" exclaimed an exasperated friend after a phone call from the village caught him unprepared. A large group had gathered at Marième's restaurant to celebrate the election of Macky Sal as President of Senegal, and everyone could appreciate his predicament. "Now that Wade is out of there, maybe things

¹⁵⁹ Maybritt Jill Alpes describes how confidence in the distributional advantages of emigration leads many Cameroonian families to encourage both daughters and sons to "bushfall"—improvise an irregular migration strategy—at great risk of financial, physical, and occult harm. Maybritt Jill Alpes, "Bushfalling at All Cost: The Economy of Migratory Knowledge in Anglophone Cameroon," *African Diaspora* 5 (2012): 113.

will get better,” someone remarked theatrically, and laughter rippled through the room. It was their common existential condition, the cost of being the one who leaves.

If my informants struggled with the burden of the gift, it was generally considered rude to complain. They understood the importance of their contributions to the reproduction of the moral and material economies on which they continued to rely, even while abroad. In the 1960s, Claude Meillassoux pointed out how capitalism depended on a division of productive and reproductive labor, in which households in non-capitalist societies generated an inexhaustible reserve army of workers for European employers.¹⁶⁰ Remittances can be understood in these terms, as an extended gift economy that operates as a shock absorber for global markets. In Beth Buggenhagen’s work, for example, Mouride women in Senegal convert the remittances of absent men into gifts of cloth and household luxuries during the celebration of births and marriages, demonstrating their own productivity and reproductive potential as lasting forms of value.¹⁶¹ Jean and John Comaroff describe the identification of migrant laborers with cattle—“gods with wet noses”—as tokens for the negotiation of rights in people under changing historical circumstances in which “it is they who are now the animate source of value for others.”¹⁶² Like James Ferguson, they describe “the bovine mystique” as a decommodification of wealth that will not dissipate, a store of value and medium of exchange marking the enduring quality of persons and relations.¹⁶³

¹⁶⁰ Claude Meillassoux, *Maidens, Meal and Money: Capitalism and the Domestic Community*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

¹⁶¹ Beth Buggenhagen, “Are Births Just “Women’s Business”? Gift Exchange, Value, and Global Volatility in Muslim Senegal,” *American Ethnologist* 38, no. 4 (2011): 714–32.

¹⁶² John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, “Goodly Beasts, Beastly Goods: Cattle and Commodities in a South African Context,” in *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992), 127–54.

¹⁶³ James Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine: Development, Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

The tension between the mechanics of capital accumulation and the unrelenting pressure to redistribute income drives the entire enterprise of emigration. This may explain why so few of my informants were willing to disavow the obligation to share with family members and even strangers abroad.¹⁶⁴ Claude and Sylvie often parried a *losako*: “Now that we are related, you only give gifts to strangers.”¹⁶⁵ Contrary to Sahlin’s “syllogistic relation” between social distance and form of exchange, Bamongo make a point of gifting strangers while holding intimates to stricter standards of “balanced reciprocity.” This inversion makes functional sense in a context of small, dispersed groups that need to keep the peace in order to trade with their neighbors.¹⁶⁶ Yet more to the point, perhaps, is the situational particularity of social relations and their potential discontinuity with their representation. Proverbs, as Bourdieu argues, may be understood in this regard as a “semi-learned grammar of practice” that corrects the tendency of the practical knowledge of lived experience to deviate too far from the orthodoxy of the moral code.¹⁶⁷

Both gifts and commodities derive value from the play between self-conscious, reflexive models and the intuitive, recursive behaviors that they seek to measure and control. This insight was behind Parry and Bloch’s reframing of the classic distinction as parallel “transactional orders” within the same societies. Short-term acquisitive behavior may be perfectly compatible with the stability of long-term social reproduction insofar as it is seen as supporting the

¹⁶⁴ In her fieldwork among Congolese migrants in South Africa, Peter Kankonde Bukasa investigates the complex motivations that lead even people who are struggling to keep the remittances flowing. “Transnational Family Ties, Remittance Motives, and Social Death among Congolese Migrants: A Socio-Anthropological Analysis,” *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 41, no. 2 (2010): 225–43.

¹⁶⁵ See Wese w’Esimela Lokumo, “La Notion de bont’okaka’: indice d’une morale mongo,” *Cahiers des Religions Africaines* 10, no. 20 (1976): 173–202.

¹⁶⁶ Arjun Appadurai also objected to Sahlin’s axiomatic correlation between reciprocity and social distance, asserting that exchange relations are constantly negotiated according to situation. See Arjun Appadurai, “Commodities and the Politics of Value,” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. A. Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 22.

¹⁶⁷ Bourdieu, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, 159–71.

maintenance of institutions. For Parry and Bloch, money does not necessarily mean what it does; the morality of any exchange depends on its symbolic valence within a total pattern of relations that is sociohistorically specific. This powerful heuristic sublates the formalist-substantivist debate by theorizing how price-forming markets may be embedded within moral economies. By suggesting that “the mature ideology of capitalism would be an example of something entirely different,” however, they preserve a distinction between worlds that my informants routinely transgress.¹⁶⁸

From my research, I find it impossible to separate long-term debts among my informants from the trade relations and global supply chains of the formal economy. First, gifts did not necessarily imply counter-gifts. When people are constantly on the move, offers of food, a glass of tea, or beauty products from abroad may indicate good will and a promise of future relations under circumstances in which reciprocity may be indefinitely deferred. In addition, while Mauss maintained that the gift normally attracts an increment, promoting redistribution throughout the community, I found that the repertoire of options allowed enormous latitude for improvisation in terms of response, particularly under straightened circumstances.¹⁶⁹ As Lisa Åkesson observes in her work in Cape Verde, understandings of obligation between migrants and their families varied according to gender and kinship arrangements and were not explicitly defined, often awaiting negotiation during visits home.¹⁷⁰ While remitters might attempt to maintain a distinction

¹⁶⁸ Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry, *Money and the Morality of Exchange* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 29. For a fuller overview of this argument and its numerous critiques, see Bill Maurer, “The Anthropology of Money,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 35 (2006): 15–36; and Keith Hart and Horacio Ortiz (2014), “The Anthropology of Money and Finance: Between Ethnography and World History,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 43 (2014): 465–82.

¹⁶⁹ Mauss, *The Gift*, 84.

¹⁷⁰ Lisa Åkesson, “Remittances and Relationships: Exchange in Cape Verdean Transnational Families,” *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology* 76, no. 3 (2011): 326–47.

between short- and long-term transactional orders, family members regularly encroached on that intention with demands that undermined the capacity to accumulate capital.¹⁷¹ Are remittances a gift or a counter-gift to a mother or a lineage in return for the gift of life? Such pressures may explain why proceeds from Bintu's *sabaar* in Chicago were not used as intended. That such contestation was as generalized as the norms of exchange also indicates why no counter-gift was pending other than a general offer of hospitality that might actually entail the receipt of yet more gifts, deepening Bintu's cumulative debts. On the other hand, Bintu's hospitality might translate into a market-oriented partnership with Amina.

This illustrates my second point, that gifts and commodities were often indistinguishable. Even visiting family members were expected to pay their board in Mama Niang's house, contrary to Sahlin's assertion that food has too much use-value to have exchange-value.¹⁷² During our visit, Amina continued a practice I had noticed in the United States of selling commodities to intimates and donating money and services to strangers. This was common among merchants who relied on community members as clients and used gifts to expand that base. In the migrant context, expanding networks through the exchange of gifts, which implied the possibility of future relations, was a critical strategy for establishing the conditions of possibility for generalized reciprocity, whereas relatives were captive customers for goods and services that were sold at a price. Amina's relationship with her cousin Lat would not "cash out" any more than her gift to Bintu guaranteed counter-gifts. However, gifts might pave the way for future sales or business partnerships if income from an external source suddenly became available. Conversely, Amina's sales maintained long-term relations, like the skin cream

¹⁷¹ See Julie Kleinman, "From Little Brother to Big Somebody: Coming of Age at the Gare du Nord," in *Affective Circuits*, ed. J. Cole and C. Groes (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

¹⁷² Sahlin, "On the Sociology of Primitive Exchange," 216.

purchased by the woman in the market, while many of her gifts went to people she might never see again.

If the long-term effects of short-term transactions are indeterminate, and even the patterns of social reproduction are subject to contestation, what model remains with which to approach the central anthropological problem of exchange? My ethnography brought me repeatedly to the real abstraction that animated social encounters of all kinds. What is the status of money in the remittance economy? “Money is the concrete symbol of our human potential to make universal society,” wrote Simmel in *The Philosophy of Money*. Following Marx, Simmel addressed the role of money as a general equivalent of exchange-value, making commensurate, quantifying, depersonalizing, and abstracting from use-value. Yet this empty type may also operate as a token, possessing quality and a particular use-value of its own. Nowhere is the two-sided character of money more evident than in Africa, which has been a silent partner in the development of capitalism since its emergence from mercantilism in the fifteenth century.¹⁷³ Recall that the earliest currency facilitating commodity and slave trading between Africans and Europeans were literally *fetiches*, magical objects that sealed commitments across incommensurable regimes of value. Monetary circulation tests and ramifies personal ties throughout the network, serving as a resource base and source of stability within “states of disorder.”¹⁷⁴ In this way, mutual trust may translate into both enhanced status and material gain, with multiplier effects for those who can mobilize credit through association with lucrative enterprises.

¹⁷³ Guyer, *Marginal Gains*, 17. “It is an example of, not just ‘another economic culture,’ but a monetary culture built up deliberately *to be other*, in relation to European theory and practice.”

¹⁷⁴ Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz, *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

Distinctions between formal and informal economies or global and local transactions makes no sense for people who make markets for a living. As Jane Guyer points out, African trade emerged in the absence of formal financial institutions to discipline the money supply and channel it towards capitalist investment. In a sense, Africa is already a finance economy, “marketable but not bankable” in formal terms only because the bank is wealth-in-people, a community that guarantees the fulfillment of obligations.¹⁷⁵ This history accounts for the disproportionate impact of remittances on African economic life. Migrant earnings do not only expand domestic consumption; they are also a source of “border fetishes,” material signs that both mark and mine difference by creating common ground for the construction of asymmetrical relationships.¹⁷⁶ Commodities such as designer clothes, cell phones, and cars are capital that circulates, accumulates, and measures the value of human lives. There is nothing to materially differentiate authentic from counterfeit origins of the thing; what matters is its indexation beyond itself, to a life elsewhere.¹⁷⁷ This semiotic value has currency, a use-value of its own that can be leveraged as the sign of futures worth gambling on.

Trade in tokens of prosperity has much in common with the monetary trade of money itself. In *The Social Life of Things*, Arjun Appadurai described financial markets as “tournaments of value” that thrive on the temporal deferral of expectation.¹⁷⁸ The derivative, an instrument for

¹⁷⁵ Guyer, *Marginal Gains*, 16.

¹⁷⁶ “Gesturing as it does toward a beyond that guarantees its own futurity as well as toward a posited past moment of origin, the fetish more generally is never positioned in a stable here-and-now and thereby confounds essentializing strategies that aim for neat resolutions and clear-cut boundaries among things and between persons and objects.” Patricia Spyer, “Introduction,” in *Border Fetishisms: Material Objects in Unstable Spaces*, ed. P. Spyer (New York: Routledge, 1998), 2.

¹⁷⁷ John L. and Jean Comaroff, “Introduction,” in *Law and Disorder in the Postcolony*, ed. J. Comaroff and J.L. Comaroff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006). On the financial side of the analogy, see Juan Pablo Pardo-Guerra, “What is a ‘Real’ Transaction in High-Frequency Trading?” in *The Real Economy: Essays in Ethnographic Theory*, ed. F. Neiburg and J. Guyer (Chicago: Hau Books, 2020).

¹⁷⁸ Appadurai, “Commodities and the Politics,” 21.

capital accumulation that derives its value from an underlying asset, is priced according to the anticipated future price of that asset. Thus, prices reference each other rather than any stable object with use-value. Such a market is not a medium for the commensuration of exchange-values; it operates as a platform for the establishment of parity between temporally unique events.¹⁷⁹ It is a form of exchange that exhibits elements of gift and commodity, manufacturing a global debt economy that binds the temporality of life to the abstraction of the calendar.¹⁸⁰ Yet insofar as lenders are willing to roll over debt rather than cut their losses, techniques for managing commercial and personal debt are essentially the same. By diversifying their commitments across public and private sectors, merchants like Amina are able to hedge their risks without defaulting on their social obligations, essentially practicing arbitrage. The arbitrageur's ideal of risk-free gain is undermined in unanticipated ways. This is because, as we have seen with respect to Rappaport's ritual, Simmel's Stranger, and Bourdieu's *habitus*, counter-performativity is intrinsic to any performative gesture.

For example, the infusion of remittances can have chaotic effects by creating schisms with those who are left out of the circuit. In African popular culture, dangerous money is represented as an inversion of wealth-in-people, an excess beyond calculation that feeds comedy, divinity, and witchcraft. In Ousmane Sembene's novella, *The Money Order*, an unemployed husband and father receives a generous remittance from his nephew in Paris. Committed to acting honorably, Ibrahima Dieng is unable to contain the rumors exaggerating his unanticipated fortune, nor is he able to surmount the bureaucratic hurdles necessary to cash the check at the post office. Without a birth certificate and government identity card, he cannot follow through on

¹⁷⁹ See Meister, *Justice as an Option*, 15.

¹⁸⁰ Jane Guyer, "Prophecy and the Near Future: Thoughts on Macroeconomic, Evangelical, and Punctuated Time," in *Legacies, Logics, Logistics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 89–109.

his promises. Five years after independence, the state has denied his existence and deprived him of the capacity to trust his own word. Meanwhile, that useless scrap of paper has taken on a life of its own. His community has become grasping and unforgiving, insensitive—like Europeans—to the intricate dance of give and take that makes the distribution of limited resources possible through debt. Within a few weeks, he has contracted new debts far exceeding his anticipated payment and suffered violence and animosity from those who feel excluded from the imagined windfall. Eventually, a college-educated nephew promises to convert the money order into cash and then claims that he has been robbed. Like the new state, his word is unconvincing.

Did Dieng's nephew steal the money outright or merely help himself to a loan, like a Western bank that profits from the wealth of others? This is the essence of witchcraft.¹⁸¹ Once, Alfonse lay a Congolese Zaire and a dollar bill on a table side by side to compare the occult imagery on each of them. "This is how Mobutu pulled our strings, and America pulls the strings of the world," he told me. Money is the active ingredient of "love magic" and features in representations of romantic love throughout Africa.¹⁸² "I thank you for thinking of me and for having confidence in me," writes Ibrahima Dieng, through a letter-writer, to the nephew who sweeps the streets in Paris:

Nowadays it is so hard to have confidence in people. I beg you not to regard money as the essence of life. If you do, it will only lead you onto a false path where, sooner or later,

¹⁸¹ Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, "Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction," *American Ethnologist* 26, no. 2 (1999): 279–303; Peter Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1996); Jean-François Bayart, *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly* (London: Longman, 1993).

¹⁸² See Jennifer Cole, "Love, Money, and Economies of Intimacy in Tamatave, Madagascar," in *Love in Africa*, ed. J. Cole and L. Thomas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); and Joseph Trapido, *Breaking Rocks: Music, Ideology and Economic Collapse, from Paris to Kinshasa* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017).

you will be alone. Money gives no security. On the contrary, it destroys all that is human in us.¹⁸³

This was the message of a graphic novella in which my friend Demba is featured as a young man who is abandoned by his fiancée for a wealthy American. “He showed her his magic money and she disappeared!” he laments, before killing himself. Suicide, of course, is a mortal sin for a devout Mouride like Demba.

The religious value of money encompasses its power to drive us to suicide. During the Grand Magal, Demba described cash for his marabou as the embodiment of his sins, and the gift as an act of purification. Likewise, Khalifa saw no contradiction in the commodification of religious objects because their religious use-value subsumed the contamination of exchange. In a “soteriology, not a sociology of reciprocity,” Mauss’s “spiritual bond” may be experienced as a free gift in the existential sense, insofar as God’s gift of life may never be reciprocated.¹⁸⁴ “A return,” argued Simmel, “is always ethically constrained; but the very first gift which initiates a relationship has (or better, is often seen as having) a voluntary and spontaneous character which no subsequent gift can possess, and for this reason it can never be entirely reciprocated.”¹⁸⁵ In the form of a gift, the money token loses its generality yet gains transcendence, rejecting the paradox intrinsic to Mauss’s formulation by asserting the reality of God in the world.¹⁸⁶

Informants professing Muslim, Christian, and even animist faith maintained that we would only recover from the recession through the gift of prayer. For Mourides, who accumulate wealth through global trade, religious devotion subsumes the depersonalization of exchange

¹⁸³ Ousmane Sembene, “The Money Order,” in *The Money Order with Genesis* (London: Heinemann, 1965), 130.

¹⁸⁴ Thomas Trautmann as cited in Jonathan Parry, “The Gift, the Indian Gift, and the ‘Indian Gift,’” *Man* 21, no. 3 (1986): 462.

¹⁸⁵ Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, 392.

¹⁸⁶ See Jean-Luc Marion, *The Reason of the Gift* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2011).

relations within the immediacy of revelation, which is experienced as commercial success, ritual practices of sharing, and the charismatic commons of the Grand Magal. Money flowed just as freely at Pentecostal Christian services where preachers from throughout West and Central Africa shared a prosperity gospel. During a “Nation Day Celebration” in June 2011, a Nigerian preacher visiting a storefront church in Evanston promised a throng from ten countries, through an interpreter, that “God is about to give you what you don’t have.” His host, Pastor Nkara’s former protégé, exhorted his followers to “build lives and raise champions” for God. He called tithes “our sacrifice.”

Whether tithes are an exchange or a sacrifice is a theological question. Under the watchful eye of God, sales and gifts can be the same. Ultimately, the difference between seeing exchange as profane, a triadic relation of reciprocity, or sacred, a dyadic relation of surrender, depends on the position of the observer. This is another case of Strathern’s “figure seen twice,” the model that acts on the world by enacting its own truth as real. My informants invent models as surely as I do and behave accordingly, interpreting the function and meaning of their remittances in ways that are both self-reinforcing and inadequate to the complexity of experience. Insofar as a gift is an obligation that must be free, indeterminacy always lurks beneath the promise of intention. Giving is a ritual performance with efficacy by virtue of this internal contradiction. One might say that an exchange is a sacrifice that invites a corresponding sacrifice on ambiguous terms, implying both competition and mutuality, rupture and continuity. The spirit of the gift is the risk of failed intentions that is also an opportunity for trust.

Encountering Arbitrage

The idea that a gift economy integrated by debt relations preceded market society is a founding myth of anthropology. Invoking Lévi-Strauss, this is not to say that it is false. “The purpose of myth,” he wrote, “is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction (an impossible achievement if, as it happens, the contradiction is real).”¹⁸⁷ In other words, a myth is a model in the form of a story. Just as the elements of a myth may be combined within unique configurations, ethnographies describe particular manifestations of community and network, integration and diversity, gift and commodity exchange. If the ethnography is successful, these accounts—along with the debates and conceptual innovations that they provoke—form part of a cumulative archive of social and disciplinary reproduction. “The myth provides its own context” insofar as these variants of ethnographic description and analysis may be compared on the basis of formal analogues rather than homologous content.¹⁸⁸

Our most enduring models are those with the flexibility to locate the past in the present while accounting for change. This is a convention that was born of necessity for a discipline charged with the impossible task of capturing the past in the present. Southall reflected that the ideal-typical descriptions of structural-functionalist analysis were predicated on an informed nostalgia: “It is the melancholy paradox of anthropology that effective study of such social systems dates only from a period so late that they have already ceased to exist in this full sense, so that an element of reconstruction has always entered into the study of them in these terms.”¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁷ Claude Lévi-Strauss, “The Structural Study of Myth,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 68, no. 270 (1955): 443.

¹⁸⁸ Lévi-Strauss, 434. “The inability to connect two kinds of relationships is overcome (or rather replaced) by the positive statement that contradictory relationships are identical inasmuch as they are both self-contradictory in a similar way.”

¹⁸⁹ Southall, “The Illusion of Tribe,” 29.

The truth in these elaborations of limited knowledge lies less in their objective accuracy than in their family resemblances with other related phenomena in comparable fields of investigation. In this respect, my ethnography is in dialogue with research that has confirmed, negated, and debated the texts of Durkheim, Weber, Marx, and Mauss for over a century. It participates in the “*hau*” of the discipline insofar as it engages conceptually with its mythical foundations.

Each of these opposing models—community/network, integration/diversity, gift/commodity—congeal an aspect of my fieldwork into a description that offers itself up for analysis. Might some combination frame a convincing window into the lives of my informants? Yet the frame itself remains a problem: What is my position of enunciation with respect to the models I formulate, and how can I account for that position without making myself the object of my inquiry? I have attempted here to capture the impossible actuality of this predicament by showing how the frame presents itself, dissolves, and reconfigures within my own mind and—I can only speculate—those of my informants.

Take, for example, a conversation with Sister Sarah, who owned an import shop on the South Side of Chicago. Sarah’s Zulu father met her Ethiopian mother while working as a veterinarian for the British colonial administration. Sarah was born in Nairobi, but her family traveled throughout Eastern and Southern Africa during her childhood. She met her African American husband in Capetown, where they were both working as schoolteachers, and returned with him to his hometown near Chicago to raise their family. They had been committed anti-apartheid activists, and she continued to organize cultural programs for young people. A group of African American teenagers came to her import shop after school to do odd jobs and make jewelry for sale.

“They don’t have a work ethic,” she complained. “I’m trying to teach them about trust

and loyalty through business. I've seen it over and over again: learning about their African heritage gives them self-respect."

She also told me that she preferred working with African Americans over other Africans. "I know African Americans who are more African than the Africans! They've been to Africa, they know the history, they care about our art, our music. Not like our people, who can't get over their problems with each other. The more you spend time with African people, the more you'll see that. You've got to watch out for yourself." Though she and her husband divorced years ago, she remained close to his family, who were originally from Mississippi. "They are more like African people," she said.

Sarah's contradictory attitudes reflected the dissonance between the frame of community, which she described in idealized terms from an outside position, and the heterogenous interests to be reconciled within her business and activist networks. She shifted between these models constantly during our conversations, describing her experience in ideal terms as an informant for my research, on one hand, but also seeking to leverage our relationship within her network, on the other. We were not very useful to each other in this regard: I did not have the political clout that she might have wished, and her relations with newer immigrants from francophone Africa were generally contentious and short-lived. My encounter with Sister Sarah represented a cut in the network that I was constructing as an object of inquiry. Our brief if intriguing relationship becomes visible here because it failed to deliver on my hopes for access to more contacts and information.

My informants were strangers even in their own land, as was I. Insofar as we were participating in a *habitus*, I was in no better a position to understand it than my informants were. I didn't always know whether my improvisations worked out, whether I danced enough at

sabaars, contributed enough to Mama Niang's expenses, or overcompensated by buying the beast for my hosts' Magal feast. Bourdieu considers how the limits of familiarity between anthropologist and informant are reflected in the findings of ethnography because people will try to deliver a "learned reconstruction of the native world" while their true experience "finds expression only in the silences, ellipses, and lacunae of the language of familiarity."¹⁹⁰ Yet the same holds among migrants—both in other countries and in the cities of their own countries—who are always negotiating norms across thresholds of difference. These disjunctures and thresholds are themselves resources in practice.¹⁹¹ The grounds for action are generated through action itself, and retroactively posited as having been there all along. Understood in this way, the patterns of practice cannot be fully known by its participants because they cannot be known at all.

Arbitrage is a word for the gambit in which the certainty that the future cannot be known operates as a bridge between people, temporalities, and lived worlds. It is a knowing practice that applies the repertoire of options with intention and doubt, subjecting the recursive instinct of habit to the self-examination of reflexive observation. Commodity exchange is not only opposed to the gift; the indeterminacy between them animates the transaction. Diversity is not only opposed to integration; it is also the ambiguity that motivates the negotiation of difference.¹⁹² The network is not only opposed to community; it is also the possibility of infinite extension that must be cut. These are not only models that reify the retroactive necessity of contingent events; they also reproduce themselves by internalizing the contingency of those events. What matters is

¹⁹⁰ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory*, 18.

¹⁹¹ Guyer, *Marginal Gains*, 4.

¹⁹² Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory*, 14. "The differences between the two parties are never clear-cut, so that each can play on the ambiguities and equivocations which this indeterminacy lends to the conduct."

not what I or my informants do or do not “know,” but the unknowability of the future and the ways in which that unknowability operates as a form of certainty in the present.

Ethnography is arbitrage when it suspends belief in the objective truth of its models without losing faith in its capacity to take a position. An ethnographer writes from within a shared world, yet must stand apart from what is being described in order to acknowledge the otherness of other people, other experiences, other worlds. Interpretations will invariably reflect the observer’s bias just as good intentions invariably go awry. Nevertheless, this negative performativity brings volatility and creativity to any system, generating ruptures large and small that invite further arbitrage. Although no permanent equilibrium is possible, the illusion of normative ground is a necessary foundation for the performance of material relations. This is the impossible actuality of the ethnographic encounter. On one hand, the anthropologist sees densely textured worlds of thought and experience, structuring relations of value and power that cry out for critique. On the other hand, she is caught up without purchase in global assemblages of minds, bodies, and things. Although no model can clear up her confusion, the practice of knowing what can’t be known changes things.

CHAPTER 2

Doing Your Part:

Network Security and the Financialization of Everyday Life

Parasites! As soon as they hear someone has money, there they are, like vultures.
—Ousmane Sembene, *The Money Order*, 1965

The rural depositor fancies that he deposits only with his banker, and fancies furthermore that when his banker lends to others, it is done to private persons whom he knows. He has not the slightest suspicion that this banker places his deposit at the disposal of some London bill-broker, over whose operations neither of them have the slightest control.
—Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. III, 1894

“We’re living history right now,” Amina told my class in grassroots organizing at the University of Chicago. “That’s what I thought when our bill passed the state legislature. I was thinking, ‘History usually happens to Africans, but now we’re making history.’”

She had been nervous at first, but warmed up quickly. At over six feet tall, she could have towered over her audience, but she preferred to sit, talk-show style. I was concerned that she might be taken aback by sharing her story with twenty-five total strangers, but I also knew her to be a persuasive speaker under pressure. Amina could be disarmingly frank with her observations, yet she also always gave the impression that there was much more that she had chosen not to say.

She had been operating her Chicago salon for nearly a decade when the state’s abrupt decision to enforce the law threw hair braiders into a panic. They came from throughout West and Central Africa, and most employed a shifting cadre of freelance braiders seeking accessible, reasonably well-paid employment. Many lacked immigration status. Well-connected and fluent

in English, Amina found herself at the center of a statewide legislative campaign to amend licensure requirements.

Until HB 5783 was signed into law in July 2010, she explained, hair braiders were required to attend cosmetology school in order to acquire a license in Illinois. Most African women, who dominated the industry, were operating illegally because they were unable to afford the training. “I wanted to follow the law. I took 600 hours of classes, but I wasn’t going to be using all those chemicals on my clients’ heads. What they were teaching had nothing to do with braiding hair, and I didn’t need anyone to teach me how to do that!”

Amina arrived in the U.S. as a college student in 1990, having just finished her first year at the University of Dakar. “I told my parents, ‘I’m not staying here. I’m leaving.’ My father was a chemistry teacher, trained by the French. He made fun of my mother for teaching English! I had a full scholarship to go to a university in Paris, and that was what he wanted for me. But I knew what I wanted, and nothing was going to get in my way. ‘You are really rebellious, telling *me* where you’re going!’ he said, and basically stopped talking to me.”

As in most things, Amina’s parents disagreed with one another. With a sister in Harlem and English skills, Amina’s mother was able to help Amina apply to college in New York City and obtain a student visa to get there. Shortly after she arrived, however, Amina discovered that her mother had sold her house to pay the tuition. “When I found that out, I went to the school and I withdrew. I said, ‘I cannot do this.’” She returned her mother’s money, got a job, and enrolled in a community college. “I felt more comfortable there anyway,” Amina continued, “because it was mostly immigrants, in the Bronx. I studied business because I didn’t like working for other people. When I got out of school, I opened a salon, but then the rent in Harlem went from \$2,500 to \$5,000 a month. That’s why I came to Chicago. It’s not so easy working for yourself. I

actually think it's harder because you put more energy into what you're doing. You do what you must to be successful. But looking back, I know it was a good decision.”

There is a complicated backstory behind Amina's assertion that her choices have paid off. Her ventures have been varied and often lucrative. When she was still a student, a classmate brought her along one weekend to the 125th Street African market in Harlem, and she saw how much money could be made. When her children were small, she and her husband Cheik would travel up and down the East Coast, selling sundresses and handbags to summer shoppers on the festival circuit. Later she got the idea of buying African artifacts—masks, jewelry, and musical instruments—to supply artisanal shops in New York, Washington DC, and Chicago. She had an uncle that worked in cargo for Air Afrique so she could ship things back cheaply during trips to Senegal and Mali. When the supply became more expensive and demand sagged, she began carrying cheaper merchandise from China and India. In the Midwest, where there were far fewer Africans, there were even more ways to make money at a lower cost of living.

These adjustments in Amina's business strategy were classic examples of arbitrage. As the trade circuit between Africa and the East Coast became saturated, she found a new price differential to exploit. Her relocation to Chicago was another negative performance, an act that created its own possibilities by countering the norm of settlement among African migrants at that time. In *An Engine Not a Camera*, Donald MacKenzie coins the term “counter-performativity” to describe the deviation of financial markets from their depiction by financial models, a “self-negating prophecy” in which representations influence observed phenomena in unpredictable ways.¹ MacKenzie documents how traders with the knowledge to identify this difference are able to arbitrage it at a profit, only to see it re-emerge elsewhere. In an analogous way, Amina used

¹ Donald MacKenzie, *An Engine Not a Camera* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 19.

the “insider knowledge” gleaned from her travels and contacts to identify opportunities that would not have existed otherwise. Over the years I came to admire Amina’s talent for seeing the value in uncertain circumstances. While I raged or mourned over what I could not control, she welcomed change as a gift of ambiguity that with patience would yield unanticipated resources.

Not that this gift of ambiguity was an unqualified blessing. It had been Amina’s husband’s idea to start over in Chicago, where they could buy a single-family house for their three sons and Amina’s eleven-year-old sister, Fatou, who had just emigrated. That was in 2000, when the economy was going strong and people were spending money. Amina opened up a salon on the South Side of the city, and it did well, but Cheik had trouble adjusting. He was uncomfortable speaking English, missed living around other Africans, and couldn’t make as much money driving a taxi as he did in New York. He started drinking too much and became abusive. After a particularly vicious argument he packed up and went back to Harlem, leaving Amina with four children to care for and a mortgage. She kept Fatou with her but sent her young sons to live with her mother in Dakar. She had hoped that this would be a temporary arrangement, but problems with her immigration case kept them apart for four years. When I met her in 2010, they had just returned, and she was struggling to suture the breach amidst new disparities between the “is” and the “ought” of her everyday life.

The tear began as a few skipped stitches. Some clients cancelled their appointments, the mortgage was late, a threatening letter arrived from the state. Then the Illinois Department of Financial and Professional Regulation (IDFPR) cracked down on unlicensed hair braiders. In the past, certain tactics, like a phone call or a fine, would have patched the problem. But the mortgage company could not be reached, and the state would no longer make exceptions. With the 2008 financial crisis, the fabric of existence began fraying to reveal what philosophers call

the “is-ought fallacy,” the error of assuming that tomorrow should be the same as yesterday.

David Hume cautioned against a tendency to attribute moral value to custom:

In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remarked, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surprised to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, *is*, and *is not*, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an *ought*, or an *ought not*.²

Raised as a Calvinist, Hume was vigilant against the slippage between statements that describe nature and judgments that assert norms. According to the doctrine of predestination, we cannot know God’s will or earn a right to salvation; thus, we assuage our doubts by believing in our sentiments as evidence that we know the world. Abrupt changes disrupt that confidence that things are as they should be, evoking a disorientation that was not unfamiliar to Africans having experienced the turbulence of bureaucratic dysfunction, currency devaluation, and war.³ For my informants, the new normal was like a *déjà vu*, a bad memory had returned in the land where these things shouldn’t happen. Fortunately, they knew what to do.

This chapter explores strategies for coping with ruptures of process in the years following the Great Recession. Shortly before the subprime mortgage crisis plunged tens of thousands of debtors into foreclosure, Jane Guyer observed the emergence of a new chronotope “honed into technologies that can deliberately unsettle and create arbitrage opportunities and gridlocks as well as logistical feats of extraordinary precision and power.”⁴ Whereas the instrumental rationality of the postwar period had focused on shaping the conditions of the near future, current expectations have fractured into “a multitude of small ruptures” requiring immediate attention.

² David Hume, *Treatise on Human Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 302.

³ Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 1–23; Jane I. Guyer, “Contemplating Uncertainty,” *Public Culture* 14, no. 3 (2002): 599–602.

⁴ Jane Guyer, “Prophecy and the Near Future: Thoughts on Macroeconomic, Evangelical, and Punctuated Time,” in *Legacies, Logics, Logistics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 108.

Guyer attributed her sensitivity to this shift in the public culture of temporality to her ethnographic experience in Nigeria during the 1990s, when a military leadership presented austerity measures as a short-term sacrifice that would deliver prosperity in the long run. As the forces shaping everyday life became too complex for ordinary understanding, a collective sense of continuity, in which plans can be realized, gave way to the temporality of debt, punctuated by events with unforeseen consequences. The temporal frame of collective possibility was deferred towards an indefinite horizon. This suspension of expectations interrupted the generative schema—what Bourdieu called the *habitus*—that reproduces certain practices as natural and right.⁵

The structural adjustments required of debtor states was an experiment in the monetarist turn that would transform global capitalism. Within a few decades, finance, insurance, and real estate had become a driving force in international development, and a pragmatics of policy by law was supplanting democratic process, even in the Global North.⁶ Michel Foucault called this transition “biopolitics,” the regulation of populations through measurement and policing.⁷ Equally important, however, has been the protection of wealth through financial instruments that hedge uncertainty by arbitrage. The “double securitization” of law enforcement and capital markets is mutually reinforcing: investor confidence depends on the fiscal constraint and civil order of the state. Accordingly, a politics of austerity has justified the hardships of volatility and deepening inequality as the short-term cost of long-term freedom and prosperity. This reasoning has much in common with the uncertain salvation of Calvinist predestination. Indeed, Guyer

⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. R. Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 78–86.

⁶ John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff (2008), “Reflections on the Anthropology of Law, Governance, and Sovereignty,” in *Rules of Law and Laws of Ruling*, ed. J. Eckert et al. (UK: Ashgate, 2008).

⁷ Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the College de France, 1975-76* (New York: Picador, 1997), 239–63.

illustrates how prophetic religion and finance both operate as midterm strategies, “unhitched ideologically from the present and distant future,” that fill the gap between the “is” and the “ought” with meaning.⁸ I expand on this argument by showing how informal relations among my informants served as a form of network security resembling finance and religion. Following the Great Recession, events of financial and bureaucratic securitization punctuated the lived future of my informants. As black migrants, however, they had already encountered racism and xenophobia, police harassment, immigration bureaucracy, and bad history with governments in Africa. Their skepticism towards the state was a strategic resource as they provided each other with the collateral needed to hedge their investments, distributing risks while making time for other options to appear.

Austerity Politics

“We did the whole thing!” she told my students. “We met with experts, we found sponsors, we wrote a bill. Then we brought seventy hair braiders to Springfield and talked to all these politicians who had never met an African in their lives!” It was an inspiring story of democracy at work in the classic genre of immigrant self-empowerment. What Amina did not tell my students, however, was that HB 5783 became law just as the once robust demand for hair braiding services was evaporating, a casualty of the 2008 Recession’s devastating impact on Chicago’s African American community. Amina began working with the Coalition because she was afraid that she would lose her house. She was supposed to be helping people apply for welfare benefits, but she spent much of her time looking for other means of support. Their

⁸ Guyer, “*Prophecy and the Near Future*,” 108.

lawyers were telling them that they were risking their green cards if they applied for public benefits, even when they were eligible. “We don’t want welfare, we want to work,” they told her.

That was just what legislators wanted to hear. It was what we had told them a decade earlier during an advocacy campaign that had won state funding for Amina’s job as a community outreach worker in a mutual aid association. We had expanded access to Medicaid, Food Stamps, disability services, and cash payments for survivors of domestic violence. But those had been more prosperous times. Joining the Pan-African coalition in 2010, I had hoped that my experience would help the organization grow. As I prepared grant proposals, however, I found that sweeping changes in the operation of government, philanthropy, and the independent sector had compromised the capacity of even the most sympathetic administrators to commit resources to advocacy. The major national foundations that once paid my salary had shifted their interests elsewhere, while state budget crises eviscerated the social service infrastructure that had both grounded and staffed anti-poverty work. Increasingly reliant on their membership base for operating funds, organizations met payroll through competitive short-term project grants with explicit goals and objectives. For many, including the Pan-African coalition, a skeletal program staff compensated for inadequate funding with a peripatetic supply of inexperienced volunteers. Under these conditions, information did not flow as freely among allies, old rhetoric was not so convincing, and strategies that had once been effective brought uneven results.

“Watch and listen, and you will learn,” our charismatic executive director counseled me early in our working relationship. Ilman plowed through his days attending meetings, staging interventions, and riding current events like a surfer in a storm, prepared to adjust plans in response to changes in the political weather. His well-founded anxieties were channeled with missionary intensity into his relationships with legislators and state administrators, fellow

advocates, and community leaders in a persuasive mix of congeniality and intellectual authority that won the hearts and minds of allies and opponents alike. I admired the sensitivity to context and audience with which Ilman mobilized his formidable array of proficiencies. He told animated stories that bridged our moments within the *longue durée* of an international struggle for social justice. Despite its comparatively thin social safety net, Illinois remained a uniquely congenial environment for coalition building thanks to parallel traditions of social work, civil rights, labor, and community organizing dating to the late nineteenth century. Chicago's entangled genealogies of liberal and radical activism over generations of opposition and collaboration had given rise to advocacy networks with deep institutional memory and established practices of political action. I came to appreciate the strength of these networks during the 1980s and 90s through contact with leaders from a range of backgrounds who positioned themselves ideologically with respect to the legacies of Eugene Debs, Jane Addams, Fred Hampton, and Saul Alinsky, among others.

Before I came to Chicago, Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals* was a primary text in my activist education. Written as a corrective to the revolutionary zeal of the late 1960s, the book provided a framework for effective, broad-based social movements. The agenda was vague, inclusive, and emergent: "The means-and-end moralists or non-doers always wind up on their ends without any means."⁹ The ends were framed in terms of universal values: a free and open society predicated on an individual's freedom to realize one's potential. It was the means, not the ends, that were radical: cultivating common cause among natural constituencies who were already predisposed to speak truth to power.¹⁰ "Democracy is not an end," Alinsky wrote, "it is the best political

⁹ Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals* (New York: Vintage, 1971), 26.

¹⁰ On the historical and sociological specificity of social change activism, see Nick Crossley, "From Reproduction to Transformation: Social Movement Fields and the Radical Habitus," *Theory, Culture and*

means available toward the achievement of these values.”¹¹ Alinsky was personally fond of disruptive tactics, having observed that “if you push a negative hard and deep enough it will break through to the other side.”¹² In practice, however, it was not always easy to distinguish between “haves” and “have nots,” particularly when you were working “within the system” rather than against it. Alinsky urged his readers to engage a working-class majority that was increasingly disoriented, disenchanting by government, and alienated by the left. Yet his distaste for political ideology made him blind to his own: a technocratic ethos of the skilled organizer who could plot an effective strategy for collective action in the field, while leaving the rest to history.

In the hands of his protégé, Ed Chambers, Alinsky’s “practical primer for realistic radicals” adapted well to a style of boardroom advocacy that won concessions from government and business leaders through moral authority and reasoned debate. There appeared to be room for negotiation during the Clinton era, even as Al Gore was “reinventing government” right into the private sector, and federal legislation slashed entitlement programs and criminalized migrants. By the time I left my advocacy career for graduate school in 2004, states were staving off bankruptcy following two decades of tax cuts and shrinking federal block grants. In Washington, expensive wars in Afghanistan and Iraq intensified calls for fiscal austerity in social spending. At the time, the surge in military spending after 9/11 and the budget cuts that followed appeared to be a necessary response to a contingent event. When the dust settled, the utopian

Society 20, no. 6 (2003), 43–68; and Marilyn Taylor et al., “Citizen Participation and Civic Activism in Comparative Perspective,” *Journal of Civil Society* 6, no. 2 (2012): 145–64.

¹¹ Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, 47.

¹² Alinsky, 133. Two favorite anecdotes of Alinsky’s were the threats of a “fart in” by civil rights protesters at a concert of the Rochester Symphony, and a “shit-in” at O’Hare airport, tying up bathrooms in retaliation for the city’s intransigence towards the demands of The Woodlawn Organization.

internationalism of neoliberal globalization had given way to a permanent state of emergency, reinforced by an affect-laden “war against terror” and a high-tech apparatus of surveillance and control.

Looking back, however, both the event and the policies that followed look like the counter-performative effects of a monetarist agenda that was managing every economy in the world.¹³ The global hegemony of the dollar was an outcome of the U.S. Treasury’s growing reliance on the international demand for financial securities. When stagflation threatened the strategic position of the U.S. in Cold War geopolitics, a hike in interest rates intended to keep inflation under control exacerbated global inequality by increasing the wealth of countries with dollar reserves and plunging debtor countries into fiscal crisis.¹⁴ The Volcker Shock of October 1979 was a watershed moment in more ways than one. First, appreciation enhanced the international appetite for Treasury bonds, driven in particular by a capital surplus in OPEC countries and Japan. In fact, the recycling of petrodollars made the U.S. a silent beneficiary of all oil transactions, an arrangement that provoked resentment in many countries.¹⁵ Second, a shift from commodity to asset inflation in the United States expanded secondary markets for capital investment outside the banking system. Congress complied by rolling back Depression-era finance legislation, transforming the global economic landscape within a decade. Third, international development banks imposed severe conditions on sovereign debt that converted

¹³ Alice Bamford and Donald MacKenzie, “Counterperformativity,” *New Left Review* 113 (2018): 97–121.

¹⁴ On the geopolitics of U.S. domestic prosperity, see Richard N. Cooper, “Economic Aspects of the Cold War, 1962-1975,” *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, ed. M.P. Leffler and O.A. Westad (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 44–64. On the internal dynamics leading to “the Volcker Shock,” see Greta R. Krippner, *Capitalizing on Crisis: The Political Origins of the Rise of Finance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

¹⁵ David E. Spiro, *The Hidden Hand of American Hegemony: Petrodollar Recycling and International Markets* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).

developing economies into a source of assets for speculation in those secondary markets.¹⁶ Last but far from least, the inversion of exchange rates gutted U.S. exports as manufacturers and agriculture lost market share to foreign competitors in deregulating markets.

By this account, the politics of double securitization—securing borders and bonds—feature more as an emergent feature of capitalist system dynamics than a masterful strategy of ideologically-motivated domination. However you look at it, the consequences for Africans and working people in the United States have been dramatic. Unlike businesses that produce goods and services for consumption, financial enterprises commodify risk in the form of instruments such as derivatives, pensions, and mortgages that secure and reproduce capital outside the cycle of human labor and use. By the time I became a professional organizer, the “Have-A-Little-And-Want-Mores” described by Alinsky had already lost the steady jobs that new immigrants were arriving to the country hoping to find. The insured, long-term jobs that had been standard since the New Deal were being replaced with commercial contracts that granted employers the power to terminate at will. The advantage for workers, they argued, was a “right to work” without union interference. As salaried employees transitioned into neoliberal opportunity markets, a growing percentage of the workforce acquired the occupational status of “independent contractor.”

Most Illinois lawmakers and administrators found human capital to be a more persuasive rationale for migrant inclusion than human or civil rights. For some of them, migrants epitomized the personal responsibility of the rights-bearing individual, a conflation of economic viability and legal subjectivity that set a standard for the deserving poor. If entrepreneurialism represents a means of self-sufficiency, however, financialization also demands greater

¹⁶ Sarah Bracking, *Money and Power: Great Predators in the Political Economy of Development* (London: Pluto Press, 2009).

interdependency by shifting the burden of risk management to the household, where individuals are morally and legally accountable for the outcome of their decisions.¹⁷ Owners of the small business of the self, these entrepreneurs are responsible for their own time, health insurance, and unemployment. Their businesses serve a double function as a source of income for owners and as an asset that can be leveraged as collateral. While savvy entrepreneurs may see this as a way to build wealth, it is more often a way to borrow more money. Amina raised the funds to manage her debt by combining commercial loans in the U.S. and Africa with informal credit arrangements. These skills proved valuable in a legislative campaign involving many forms of arbitrage—organizing the hair braiders, coalition-building with African American women, lobbying indifferent legislators, and subverting gender norms within Senegalese families. In this regard, the personal trust of “network security” both mirrored and extended the discipline of payments that drives the global economy.

There was a homology between local and international dynamics of financialization that did not apply at the federal level. The national architects of the hair braider’s campaign were impervious to the growing gap between an advocacy model predicated on the value of human capital and economic conditions of asset devaluation. Late in the campaign, Amina and I participated in a meeting with lawyers from a Washington-based think tank, the Institute of Justice (IJ), funded by the Koch brothers to promote free markets through local initiatives. They informed us that as workers embraced the entrepreneurial alternative to wage labor, battles over licensing were erupting in state and local governments across the country.¹⁸ They were

¹⁷ Dick Bryan et al., “Financialization and Marx: Giving Labor and Capital a Financial Makeover,” *Review of Radical Political Economics* 4 (2009): 458–72.

¹⁸ See Melinda Cooper, “Shadow Money and the Shadow Workforce: Rethinking Labor and Liquidity,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 114, no. 2 (2015): 395–423.

engaging small-government conservatives in a national effort to deregulate a range of semi-skilled occupations, from funeral directors and interior designers to massage therapists and private investigators.¹⁹ Having lobbied for charter schools and the licensing of food trucks, they were now turning their attention to hair braider cases in a number of states. The lawyers were not pleased to hear that our organization was about to arrive at a compromise rather than holding out for a categorical exemption from licensure.

Framing deregulation as a civil rights issue, this libertarian position maintains that any professional barrier to entry undermines equal access to economic opportunity and self-sufficiency. In a 2011 *National Review* article, the IJ's co-founder, Clint Bolick, traced the genealogy of their judicial advocacy to the 1873 Slaughterhouse Cases, which upheld the State of Louisiana's authority to regulate butchers in New Orleans. According to Bolick, this decision failed to extend the privileges and immunities guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment to black citizens of the state of Louisiana. "Governments at every level," he writes, "not to mention unelected regulatory agencies—regularly deny individuals the basic freedom of enterprise that is every American's birthright."²⁰ At issue in the hair braider cases were the rights of individuals *not* born in America. The IJ was particularly opposed to the regulation of trades that required little capital or formal training, precisely the occupations that attract migrants: cosmetology and food service, construction and landscape contracting, child care, hospitality, and transportation. These are jobs that thrive in the informal sector, and in many cases can be operated from private homes and cars. This means that in countries with robust professional lobbies and consumer protection laws, licensing schemes create a tiered service economy, extracting fees and

¹⁹ See Robert J. Thornton and Edward J. Timmons, "The De-Licensing of Occupations in the United States," Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Monthly Labor Review* (May 2015).

²⁰ Clint Bolick, "Economic Freedom and the Constitution," *National Review*, May 19, 2011.

increasing earnings by reducing competition to members—what the libertarian policy literature refers to as “regulatory capture”—while pushing illegal practitioners underground where they avoid detection by limiting their services to customers they can trust. Thus, deregulation of semi-skilled services is consistent with a trend favoring broad competition and lower prices over professionalization and quality control.

In this regard, HB 5783 contributed to a shift towards the informalization of economic activity in the United States not unlike the *status quo* in Africa. “When people started getting letters from the state,” Amina told my students, “they didn’t understand why they needed a license in the first place. At home in our countries, we just do our job and get paid for it.” In a spirited online debate over the new law, one contributor dismissed the cosmetologists’ safety concerns, writing: “Consumers vote with their feet and with their dollars by writing reviews on websites, and by talking with their friends.”²¹ The logic that internet reviews are adequate protection for the public has won the day with the *de facto* supremacy of peer-to-peer platform-based services such as Uber and AirBnB over traditional business models. Internet-mediated exchange leaves both the provider and consumer to bear the full risks of their transaction, as most internet shoppers quickly discover. Libertarians assume that the invisible hand of the market will prevent disequilibrium while innovation prevents saturation and promotes growth. Entrepreneurs possessing higher quantities of human capital should rise to the top, while less successful contenders are encouraged to realize their potential in markets that better fit their capabilities.

²¹ Comment by M. Thomas, in Jacob Goldstein, “Why It’s Illegal to Braid Hair Without a License,” *Planet Money*, National Public Radio, June 12, 2012.

Logically, this theory should entail the liberalization of international migration as well as trade. However, most libertarians limit “the open market” to the national borders of the United States, at least with respect to human mobility. In fact, Bolick and Jeb Bush, former governor of Florida, proposed “a new vision for immigration policy” that would replace family reunification preferences with a demand-driven system for young, enterprising individuals who would eschew public assistance and enhance American competitiveness in the global economy. The book drew a line in the sand during the early phases of the 2016 election season by opposing a path to citizenship for immigrants living out of status. “A grant of citizenship is an undeserving reward for conduct that we cannot afford to encourage,” they wrote. While there were always exceptions, it was incumbent on migrants to demonstrate that they were deserving of their market freedoms.²² Behind this assertion of intrinsic superiority lurks an anxiety, inherent to the idea of “negative rights,” that democracy might constrain the freedom of its members. That any form of government has the tendency to slide into tyranny is the libertarian presupposition. Any politics that conceives of society as a medium of “positive rights”—education, health, or material well-being—constitutes a threat to self-sovereignty.²³ According to this philosophy, free trade policies promote the capacity for the exercise of free will among people who are burdened by the constraints of government and society. But why not open borders? Libertarian theorists express

²² Jeb Bush and Clint Bolick, *Immigration Wars: Forging an American Solution* (New York: Threshold Editions, 2014), 44.

²³ Whereas conservative liberals stress the “negative right” from interference of some kind, progressive liberals do not acknowledge this distinction, stressing the logical inseparability of “freedom from” and “freedom to” in the realization of one’s capabilities. This debate has been central to political debate in the United States since the American Revolution and has been formative to political philosophy and international law. See David Abraham, “Liberty without Equality: The Property-Rights Connection in a ‘Negative Citizenship’ Regime,” *Law and Social Inquiry* 21, no. 1 (1996): 1–65. For a concise statement of the philosophical problem, see Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” in *Liberty: Incorporating Four Essays on Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 166–217. For an outsider response using the terms of the debate, see G.A. Cohen, *Why Not Socialism?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

the concern that immigration from collectivist societies would have a long-term demographic impact, potentially skewing the electorate in favor of stronger institutions.²⁴ This reasoning privileges migrants who value personal identity over community, resilient individuals for whom hardship is no obstacle and for whom mere opportunity is a sufficient condition for the realization of capabilities.²⁵

The hair braiders' successful legislative campaign failed the IJ's libertarian ideal on two fronts. First, the new rules did not eliminate entry barriers to the profession. "We want them to become part of the cosmetology framework," Representative Burns told the press. "If they are licensed and regulated, they can go out and borrow money and expand stores and shops and really get some economic benefits."²⁶ Rather than eliminating red tape altogether, the law created a new license with a \$30 fee and a reduced professionalization requirement: from 1,500 hours of general cosmetology to 300 hours of specialized training in braiding and sanitation. Existing hair braiders could "grandfather" into the program if they applied by the deadline, along with three affidavits from clients or business partners verifying that they had been practitioners for at least two consecutive years. These conditions provided the impetus for Amina to establish a professional association through which colleagues could consult about their businesses. This was precisely the sort of "regulatory capture" that the IJ was trying to prevent.

²⁴ This is the concern expressed by Ludwig von Mises, *Liberalism: The Classical Tradition*, ed. Bettina Bien Greaves (Indianapolis, IN: The Liberty Fund, 2005), 103–108. Hayek was less concerned with the politics of the immigrants as he was about the nationalist backlash on the part of the native population. See Friedrich A. Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty: The Mirage of Social Justice* (London: Routledge, 1998), 58.

²⁵ Amartya Sen counters this argument in his *Development as Freedom* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000).

²⁶ Dawn Turner Trice, "New Law Woven Specifically for Hair Braiders: Education, Training Aimed at Bringing Order to Art Form," *Chicago Tribune*, October 5, 2011.

“That was when the real work began,” Amina explained to my students. “We had to get the word out. Some people thought the letters were from immigration and closed their shops because they were afraid they’d get deported.” She took it on herself to visit hair braiding salons throughout the city and suburbs, disseminating information about the new law and hosting workshops to assist in the application process. She also problem-solved with braiders who did not have social security numbers and were in danger of losing their shops, often finding someone to submit the application on their behalf. Despite repeated efforts during negotiations surrounding the new law, the state had refused to allow undocumented migrants to apply for a license by using the tax identification number provided by the Internal Revenue Service. The state’s insistence on this point guaranteed that the two-tiered structure of the hair braiding industry would remain.

From the IJ’s standpoint, however, the greater disappointment would have been the new law’s failure to enhance the autonomy of its beneficiaries. Though hundreds of women-owned businesses received state recognition, their capacity to stay afloat was increasingly reliant on informal credit within what anthropologists have traditionally called a “gift economy.” The appearance of personhood as self-possession, as associated with commodity exchange, was underwritten by inter-dependencies that are intrinsic to migration and fostered by financialization. Consummately self-possessed, Amina performed the role of a neoliberal entrepreneur who accumulated personal power and moral value by selling her skills in the market at a profit. This persona was critical to her effectiveness as an advocate for herself and others, but so was her reputation as a broker of relations among other migrants who were looking for

opportunities to borrow and lend.²⁷ Indeed, it was the counter-performative work of extended obligation that brought most of the hair braiders to the United States in the first place, where they encountered an arbitrage opportunity in the form of cultural difference and its common cause with women who were looking for a new way to treat their hair.

The politics of hair in the United States have deep roots in the struggle against racism. From the start of the twentieth century, black beauty represented a niche market for African American businesses to thrive in a hostile business environment.²⁸ Based in Chicago, black-owned firms like Claude A. Barnett's Kashmir Chemical Company, the Fuller Products Company, and Johnson Products became giants by tapping into a proliferating infrastructure of beauty salons that served as epicenters in the everyday lives of black women owners and clients.²⁹ Though the black power movement of the 1960s showcased natural hair as a political statement, sumptuary standards explicitly discriminated against natural hair styles for black women in the workplace until well into the 1990s.³⁰ This was also when African hair braiding

²⁷ In many languages "borrow" and "lend" are signified by the same word, what linguists call enantiosemia. See Jordan Finkin, "Enantiosemia in Arabic and Beyond," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 68, no. 3 (2005): 369–86.

²⁸ See Robert Mark Silverman, "The Effects of Racism and Racial Discrimination on Minority Business Development: The Case of Black Manufacturers in Chicago's Ethnic Beauty Aids Industry," *Journal of Social History* 31, no. 3 (1998): 571–97.

²⁹ Although the industry was founded by Madame C.J. Walker, who would become the first female self-made millionaire in the United States, most of these black executives were men. On the historical importance of the hair care industry for black women, see Adia M. Harvey (2005), "Becoming Entrepreneurs: Intersections of Race, Class and Gender at the Black Beauty Salon," *Gender and Society* 19, no. 6 (2005): 789–808; and Evalyn Newman Phillips, "Doing More Than Heads: African American Women Healing, Resisting, and Uplifting Others in St. Petersburg, Florida," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 22, no. 2 (2001): 25–42.

³⁰ In its 1981 decision *Rogers v American Airlines*, the New York District Court upheld the right of employers to prohibit the wearing of braided hairstyles. Its rejection of the defendant's civil rights claim denied interaction effects of race and gender, prompting the interventions of intersectionality theory. See Paulette M. Caldwell, "A Hair Piece: Perspectives on the Intersection of Race and Gender," *Duke Law Journal* (1991): 365–79; and Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99.

appeared as an option for women who resisted the internalized racism of beauty norms promoting chemical treatments as a solution to “bad hair.”³¹

The condition of possibility for this parity of supply and demand was a history of impossibility for both African Americans and Africans. In the United States, the expansion of credit markets opened up unprecedented opportunities for black ownership of property, partially dismantling caste structures that had been in place since the colonial period. It also funded an explosion in the consumption of commodities. Chinese imports flooded the American market and small businesses offered once elite services at affordable prices. Immigrants tapped into global supply chains to introduce new tastes and practices. Lifestyle became a theatre of empowerment. As a fragile but growing African American middle class asserted its buying power, black women explored new options for self-expression, and sumptuary standards began to change. Newly arriving migrants from Senegal were well-positioned to meet this demand. Historically practiced by women of the Wolof artisanal caste, or *ñeeño*, hair braiding became a means for upward mobility among Senegalese women of all backgrounds, including higher rank *géer* such as Amina. “We all grow up braiding hair, but I never expected to do it for a living!” Amina confessed. “On the other hand, I was always good at business. I like people and I know what they want. It didn’t take me long to figure out that this was what they wanted.” For Cheikh

³¹ See Ayana D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2001). Monica Bell challenges the claim that black women straighten their hair because of “the negativity associated with African American physical characteristics” as yet another pathologization of African American social practices. “The Braiding Cases, Cultural Deference, and the Inadequate Protection of Black Women Consumers,” *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 19, no. 1 (2007): 146.

Anta Babou, the caste associations of artisanal labor explain why Senegalese women were more likely to think of themselves as professionals rather than artisans.³²

For my informants, the gendering of their profession as an opportunity for control over resources overshadowed any residual sensitivity to lineage hierarchies. In the United States and Africa, they appreciated the cultural cachet of marketing their product as an art form with clients, as well as with delicensing advocates and legislators. Babou estimated in 2009 that 70 percent of Senegalese women in the United States were in the braiding business, laying the groundwork for women from other African countries to enter the field. “Hair braiding is perhaps the most widespread form of body art in Africa,” he writes, but it is almost universally considered women’s work.³³ Men’s avoidance of women’s work had profound implications for the domestic politics of adaptation among my informants. As Babou elaborates, men often managed the early shops in the United States, renting space and ordering supplies. Those with experience in cross-border trade initiated partnerships with Asian vendors of synthetic and natural hair, which are used as extensions for the elaborate coiffures of an emerging transatlantic aesthetic. But women soon dominated the profession, investing cash into convertible assets such as houses, vehicles, and businesses abroad, building reputations and asserting greater authority in domestic life.³⁴

“Let’s face it, I was doing better than he was,” Amina told me of her husband Cheik’s ill-fated relocation to Chicago. “He didn’t like that.” In marriages such as Amina’s, in which

³² Cheikh Anta Babou, “Migration and Cultural Change: Money, ‘Caste,’ Gender, and Social Status among Senegalese Female Hair Braiders in the United States,” *Africa Today* 55, no. 2 (2009): 3–22.

³³ Babou, 4.

³⁴ See Beth Buggenhagen, *Muslim Families in Global Senegal: Money Takes Care of Shame* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012); Isabelle Guerin, “Women and Money: Lessons from Senegal,” *Development and Change* 37, no. 3 (2006): 549–70; and John A. Arthur, *African Women Immigrants in the United States: Crossing Transnational Borders* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009).

men earned significantly less than their wives, and extended kinship relationships were attenuated by distance, domestic stress often led to intimate partner violence and divorce.³⁵ My research supports Babou's observation that men who are threatened by their wives' economic autonomy return to their countries of origin to begin second families. While men would sometimes manage a beauty shop attached to a salon, I met a number of women who had taken over the shop after their marriages failed. Cheik could not leave the country because he held a precarious work permit under a suspension of deportation. However, upon returning to Harlem he did remarry a much younger woman from his native Mali. This was a turning point for Amina. Like Mariama Ba's protagonist in *So Long a Letter*, Ramatoulaye, whose husband took a much younger second wife after many years of marriage, she counseled other women to "slough off this surfeit of dreamy sentimentality. Accept reality in its crude ugliness."³⁶

The tensions between men and women in the hair braiding business undermined an earlier attempt to arrive at a legislative compromise in Illinois. A 1985 law that increased cosmetology training requirements had contained no reference to natural hair practitioners. However, the proliferation of hair braiding salons during the 1990s led to the adoption of a 2001 amendment, forcing many African women to work out of their homes. Because lower overhead allowed them to charge less, regulation had the counterintuitive effect of "breaking the prices," generating significant tensions with more established African American businesses.³⁷ An effort by the Pan-African coalition to challenge the amendment succeeded in raising funds for a

³⁵ Babou, "Migration and Cultural Change," 13; Adeyinka M. Akinsulure-Smith et al., "Intimate Partner Violence among West Africa Immigrants," *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment and Trauma* 22 (2013): 109–26; Baffour K. Takyi and Christopher L. Broughton, "Marital Stability in Sub-Saharan Africa: Do Women's Autonomy and Socioeconomic Situation Matter?" *Journal of Family and Economic Issues* 27, no. 1 (2006): 113–32.

³⁶ Mariama Bâ, *So Long a Letter* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2012), 35.

³⁷ See Tasneem Paghdiala, "The Politics of Braids," *Chicago Reader*, August 31, 2006.

lobbyist. With African American State Representative Art Turner as sponsor, proposed legislation that would have reduced licensure requirements to 500 hours of training and a mandatory exam was unanimously approved in the House and had every chance of passing the Senate as well. But the hair braider's association, comprised mostly of African women, fell apart over suspicion that the men steering the campaign were misusing the funds. Unable to pay the lobbyist and without other channels of support, the coalition was forced to drop the effort.

During the campaign in 2009, on the other hand, women did their own lobbying. To some extent, the campaign resembled the Alinsky-style organizing with which I was familiar. However, the fruitful coincidence of a growing Senegalese diaspora and Afrocentric sensibilities among black Americans had generated its own effects in a political climate of conflicting demands for security, equality, and austerity. Under these volatile conditions, both the IDFPR enforcement action and HB 5783 drew a cast of supporters and opponents that disrupted customary political alliances. For some, it was a community empowerment story. In a supportive editorial by the *Chicago Tribune*, State Representative Will Burns defended his sponsorship of the bill in cultural terms: "I grew up in a black neighborhood, I was used to seeing women braid each other's hair in the community."³⁸ This appeal to the expertise of identity was rejected by trained cosmetologists who stressed the public health hazards. In fact, much of the opposition to the bill came from African American cosmetologists, who expressed concerns that the extra-tight braids popularized by African practitioners, although neat and long-lasting, might cause a dermatological condition called traction alopecia, which results in permanent hair loss over time.³⁹ They also complained that their indigenous hair braiding traditions were being dismissed

³⁸ Editorial Board, "A Twist of Hair," *Chicago Tribune*, September 28, 2009.

³⁹ The most popular styles require either tight cornrows with extensions, which add volume to the braids, or weaves, in which extensions are anchored by braiding the ends with the customer's own hair in layers.

by Africans asserting greater authenticity; Africans in turn felt that the emphasis of the pro-licensure camp on proper hygiene unfairly characterized them as dirty.

Whatever the content of their arguments, however, the economic reality was that both full-service and braiding salons owned by African Americans were competing with a growing number of African businesses for a limited supply of cash-poor African American clients. Thus, the potential for schism within the coalition was ever-present, not only between Africans and African Americans but also among the hair braiders themselves. As director of the revived coalition, Ilman—an anglophone West African who could not speak French—understood that the campaign needed a bilingual francophone woman to organize its base. Accompanying Amina in the field, I noticed that while anglophone shop owners greeted us politely and appeared to appreciate the information, francophone owners welcomed us as though they already knew Amina, even when they were strangers. This was the case even when they spoke English with their clients and first languages with their colleagues. Of course, there were always exceptions. Amina’s native fluency in Bambara, a Manding language, often connected immediately with Malinke people from the Gambia, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Guinea-Bissau.

Indeed, the success of the campaign was partially due to its organizers’ skill in making something with exceptions. Ilman drew on long-term relationships with Chicago’s black leadership, paving the way to a more favorable compromise by reducing friction with the cosmetological association. Likewise, Amina had cultivated casual relationships with African American women over the years. She had made some close friends with other black vendors on the festival circuit and had gotten to know the parents of Fatou’s friends when she was on the

See Monica C. Bell, “The Braiding Cases.” While Bell supports reduced regulation for natural hair stylists, she challenges the assumption that consumers should bear the full risk of health consequences for commercial services.

track team in high school. She had also made connections with black cosmetologists through the owner of the beauty salon next door. She referred clients seeking haircuts, straighteners, and permanents, and received customers for braided styles in return. During the campaign, her neighbor became an important ally, gathering support for the bill and brokering an arrangement with an African American cosmetology school that was interested in expanding its curriculum to include hair braiding students. These accidental relations were comparable with any migrant's integration, yet they gained strength from the shared experience of blackness. Indeed, the African unity that the hair braiders presented to the state legislator was no less accidental. The Pan-African coalition was nothing more or less than the juxtaposition of people who identified themselves on the basis of family resemblances, momentarily, through the activity of being together. The coalition existed only by virtue of its claim on the near future of its members based on the cumulative memory of that activity and the obligations that it entailed.

It would seem as though the natural hair industry represented a promising area for Pan-African partnership and economic renewal. But unlike the rags-to-riches stories of pioneers in the field, the salons that I visited clearly operated with a narrow margin of profit.⁴⁰ Established owners recalled with nostalgia the years when the more elaborate styles cost \$500 or more, and they were able to take home thousands of dollars a day. During my fieldwork, their employees generally operated as private contractors, renting a chair and paying a portion of their earnings which, with deflated prices, were barely enough to pay the bills. Some might save up and eventually open their own salon, but others were considering this a less viable trajectory, both because of declining yields and the long-term strain on the hands and back. If the golden age of

⁴⁰ Ndeye Astu Aac of Washington DC was able to amass a fortune by tightly supervising a workforce of Wolof braiders imported from Dakar for that purpose. Babou, "Migration and Cultural Change," 15–16.

hair braiding was cut short by the recession, black women were also spending their money on other things. The fashion was shifting to hairstyles that were even more natural without the fuss, the discomfort, and the potential damage of a tight braid or a weave.

Despite the victory of HB 5783, many of the African women who had lobbied in Springfield were eventually forced to seek alternative employment. Braiders were supplementing their depleted income with other activities such as retail sales, cleaning, or care work. Braiders began driving taxis, work that was previously considered too dangerous for women. Soon, Uber and Lyft became a popular option for those who could afford a suitable car. Even more recently, relatively wealthy African men have invested in fleets of cars that they lease to both men and women for a percentage of their earnings. Amina's sister Fatou tested a number of alternative income-generating schemes, working as a model, driver, teeth whitener, political campaigner, and flight attendant before finally saving up enough money to buy two houses on the foreclosure market. With the help of an undocumented Mexican contractor, she made a significant profit "flipping houses" on the Southwest Side of Chicago as it slowly recovered from the housing crisis. She had gotten the idea from a hair braider who did well by investing in commercial real estate that had been damaged during the 2011 civil war in Abidjan.

Demands on Amina's time increased with her caseload at the Pan-African coalition. She eventually left the job but could not just leave her clients behind. For the next two years, Amina would serve as an unpaid social worker on call to anyone who might reach her through her networks, representing them before state bureaucracies and consulting with lawyers. She supported her family by braiding and selling women's fashions, but her profits ebbed to a trickle. Reluctant to let go of her entrepreneurial ambitions, she traveled to China to buy directly from producers and explored business possibilities in Africa. She also leveraged her reputation with

the IDFPR and developed a statewide curriculum for training trainers to comply with the new requirements. In 2014, she decided that the best way to improve her situation was to live on student loans while she earned a social work degree. None of these income-generating schemes were paramount or mutually exclusive, nor did they interfere with her availability to help others informally with immigration and welfare issues. Indeed, those appeals increased as the Obama administration stepped up immigration enforcement, and people who were already in financial trouble desperately sought to prevent deportation.⁴¹

In the years following the subprime mortgage crisis, the libertarian fantasy of small business as the key to prosperity collapsed like a house of cards. For Amina and her colleagues, hair braiding was less a realization of personal potential or an expression of human capital than a fallback strategy. It was an option within a diversified portfolio with which they hedged their position, with variable success, under conditions of austerity. Monica Bell argues that the legal and political response of cultural deference in the hair braiding cases, as well as on other issues affecting women of color—such as domestic violence and female genital mutilation (FGM)—constitutes a form of race-sex bias that tokenizes black women.⁴² In their rush to demonstrate that they are not racist, courts and legislators are too quick to dismiss possible harm to women—such as traction alopecia—as the collateral damage of valued cultural practices. I don't disagree with this assessment, but whose token is it? Rather than merely performing culture for profit, the

⁴¹ During the Obama administration, 3.1 million persons were deported, more than any other administration in U.S. history. The majority were removed for immigration violations and nonviolent offenses. See Rubén G. Rumbaut et al., “Immigration and Crime and the Criminalization of Immigration,” in *Routledge International Handbook of Migration Studies*, ed. S. Gold and S. Nawyn (New York: Routledge, 2018).

⁴² “Particularly in the context of international women's rights, culture has been an excuse for the continuation of practices that many women, including those who are part of those cultures, denounce.” Bell, “The Braiding Cases,” 146.

women anointed by law had the option of positing their identity as a hedge against risk. By indexing African hair braiders as “good migrants” by virtue of their art and enterprise, HB 5783 was an asset that they could hold in their “nimble fingers,” a coin of authenticity that could be cashed in as needed.⁴³ Simultaneously, the new law was converted within their social networks into a gift collectively granted to the next generation of migrant women.

First World Problems

“This is a first-world country!” exclaimed a server during lunch at a restaurant on the Northwest Side of Chicago. “That means we include two sides with your entrée!” Amina and I burst into laughter. It was August 2015, and we were talking about how much Chicago was beginning to feel like Dakar. Construction had been picking up in affluent areas but no one that she knew had any money. In her neighborhood, houses were still empty and real estate wasn’t selling. Days went by without a single customer in her salon, and for the second summer in a row, she had been unable to sell off the merchandise that she bought during last year’s trip to China. Business was so bad that Amina had decided to liquidate her assets and return to New York City, where she hoped to get a job as a social worker.

Things were not going well on the family front either. Her son Modibo had fallen in with a rough crowd, and in June 2012, he dragged his older brother Moussa into a burglary that made her a pariah in her neighborhood. Amina blamed herself. As a single mother juggling three jobs, she could not spend enough time at home to keep her sons out of trouble, and she couldn’t afford to pay for programs to keep them busy after school. There was also a lot of racial tension,

⁴³ On the trope of “nimble fingers” as a cultural rationalization for the exploitation of women workers, see Aihwa Ong, “The Gender and Labor Politics of Postmodernity,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 20 (1991): 279–309.

particularly since the recession. She and Cheik had bought their house in 2000, but she had always felt like an outsider. Though the suburb was racially mixed, black and white residents didn't seem to have much to do with each other, and no one seemed to like immigrants. When Modibo was diagnosed with ADHD, he was placed into a special education program in a separate building where they were served lunch at their desks. "They were all black and immigrant kids," Amina had told me at the time. When I told her that sounded like a civil rights violation, she complained to the school and even filed a complaint with the Department of Education, but nothing came of it. She didn't make an issue of it with the boys, but they knew something was wrong.

"Modibo hated being singled out that way," Amina recalled. "He wants people to like him, and they were getting made fun of all the time because they're African. He started doing this stupid stuff because he wanted to show his friends he belongs."

"You did your best," I told her. I had been having my own struggles parenting teenaged daughters, and this is what she would say as I revisited my own explanations again and again. How can you not blame yourself when your children don't thrive? Through our conversations we could take some distance from that roller coaster of guilt, recrimination, and guarded optimism as the story continued.

"It's always the mother's fault," she said wryly.

I had accompanied Amina during the legal proceedings. Cheik flew in from New York City and was behind the wheel of her SUV when they picked me up at the commuter train station. Moussa was in the back seat, dressed exactly like his father in a button-down shirt, tail out but pressed, with clean white gym shoes and grey jeans that covered up the electronic monitor on his ankle.

"They spent four and a half years in Senegal," Cheik told me, loud enough for his son to hear. "They should know better! They know how people have to struggle. They get all the food they want. They get new clothes and computer games. What else do they need?"

"You should see their little brother," Amina added. "He doesn't even want to go outside. He just plays computer games all day. I ask him to do something for me and it's, 'Sure, mom. Whatever you want, mom.' He wants to show he's not like his brothers!"

"It's true," grumbled Cheik. "He's so lonely these days he calls me all the time!"

Moussa kept his eyes on his shoes.

When we got to court, a skinny, middle-aged lawyer with stained teeth and an expensive-looking suit introduced himself to us as the private attorney who had been assigned the case. He gave Amina his card. "The boys are going to leave the state and live with their father," she told him. At this point the lawyer noticed Cheik and shook his hand. "We'll see what we can do," he said, and disappeared.

While we waited, Cheik sat beside his mute son with a grim expression, and Amina told me about people she was helping who had it worse: a woman from Benin who was stopped at a traffic light and was now in deportation proceedings; a Fulani woman who had left her daughters behind in Mali to escape her abusive husband. A friend of hers had sent her thirteen-year-old son to live with his grandmother in Dakar. "He doesn't like it there, so he goes to the U.S. embassy and tells them he's an American being kept in Senegal against his will. They made his mother buy him a full-priced ticket for the next plane back to Chicago!" Amina shook her head. She hadn't seen Modibo since he was arrested a week ago. She wanted him to worry and wonder. "I'm not going to coddle him. He's got to learn his lesson!"

When they called our case, we crowded into a courtroom barely large enough to hold the judge's bench, flanked by clerks, and the lawyers' tables. The plain benches on the sides of the room were already full of police and other observers. Then seven people entered the room and lined up along the wall, glaring at us. "The neighbors," she whispered. When they brought out Modibo in handcuffs, all eyes turned to him. "Do they know he's twelve years old?" I asked her. Moussa was thirteen. It was evident that in that crowded room, they were already criminals.

Three weeks later, when we returned with the boys to hear the judge's decision, Amina was made to feel like a criminal. "The police say you have a pattern of going back and forth to Africa," the defense attorney told her. "You haven't put up your house for sale, and you still own a business here, so the feeling in there is that this is all a charade, that you'll go on a visit and then you'll all be right back in the community." In order to keep the boys out of jail, Amina had to sign an affidavit promising that she would not bring them back to Illinois.

"I guess these are first-world problems," Amina remarked, as the server returned with all that food. We had both noticed that Cold War anachronism cropping up in casual conversations. Amina's friends joked about going home to the "first world" in Africa. For them, the irony of the phrase might reference both the immigrant's distancing from origins and the added indignity of racism. I had also heard it used to describe overwork, marital stress, college admissions, choosing a computer. Both imperious and self-effacing, the idiom carried a certain wistfulness, diminishing the gravity of the challenges at hand by implying that it could be so much worse, compared with the denizens of less fortunate worlds. It carried a touch of willful denial, I thought, however ironic, with respect to the severity and the generality of hardship. With its scent of relief, such a remark would misfire if it were directly applied to economic insecurity and racism, for example. Indeed, it has the rhetorical effect of banishing such intractable difficulties

to the disavowed “Third World” within the first: the ghettos and reservations, prisons and sweatshops where immigrants, addicts, and racial minorities languish in a state of exception.⁴⁴

The young, white woman server may have been acknowledging, however unconsciously, that the hardships associated with others were encroaching on territory once experienced as immune.⁴⁵

Poverty is catching, her quip implied. The prospect had become a universal threat to be warded off through magical thinking and a xenophobic politics that resembled a witch hunt.⁴⁶

French demographer Alfred Sauvy introduced the term in a popular French news magazine. “This ignored, exploited, scorned Third World, like the Third Estate, wants to become something too,” he wrote in 1952, referring both to the colonies and to the geopolitical polarity that erased any third position.⁴⁷ The remark expressed France’s unwillingness to align definitively with the two antagonists of the Cold War, a perspective from which Sauvy could ruminate on the absurdity of a global order in which the United States and Russia encompassed

⁴⁴ “At once excluding bare life from and capturing it within the political order, the state of exception actually constituted, in its very separateness, the hidden foundation on which the entire political system rested. When its borders begin to be blurred, the bare life that dwelt there frees itself in the city and becomes both subject and object of the conflicts of the political order, the one place for both the organization of State power and emancipation from it.” Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 12–13.

⁴⁵ On the political theory of contagion and immunity, see Esposito, Roberto, *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life*, trans. Z. Hanafi, (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2011). For a review of the wide-reaching effects of income inequality in the contemporary United States, see Bruce Western et al., “Economic Insecurity and Social Stratification,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 38 (2012): 341–59.

⁴⁶ In 2019, xenophobic rhetoric is a mainstay of the presidency. In an essay comparing Nyakyusa’s and Pondo’s attitudes towards the supernatural, South African anthropologist Monica Wilson wrote that “I see witch beliefs as the standardized nightmare of a group, and I believe that the comparative analysis of such nightmares is not merely an antiquarian exercise but one of the keys to the understanding of society.” She suggests that this insight is relevant not only to small-scale societies, but may also apply to the tendency towards modern scapegoating, a reference perhaps to the “red scare” provoked by U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy at the time she was writing. Monica Hunter Wilson, “Witch Beliefs and Social Structure,” *American Journal of Sociology* 56, no. 4 (1951): 307–13. Jean Comaroff takes up this idea with respect to the anxieties of late capitalism in Jean Comaroff, “Consuming Passions: Child Abuse, Fetishism, and ‘The New World Order,’” *Culture* 17, nos. 1–2 (1997): 7–25.

⁴⁷ Alfred Sauvy, “Trois Mondes, Une Planète,” *L’Observateur* 118, 14 août (1952): 14.

all conceivable futures. Yet Sauvy's outside position of observation was already part of the arrangement. The ranking of regions by level of industrial development and per capita income was a postwar convention that had political intentions and epistemological effects. As historian Carl Pletsch would observe thirty years later, this triadic arrangement organized a division of social scientific labor that entrenched a contingent historical development as a conceptual scheme that had the effect—often unintended—of justifying domination in terms of modernization.⁴⁸ At around the same time, Peter Worsley noted the indexical quality of the third:

The various meanings with which the term “Third World” has been invested show family resemblances, even though they do not fully coincide. They have, that is, a common referent to the real world out there: the unequal, institutionalized distribution of wealth and illth on a world scale.⁴⁹

The fact that the term lingers decades after the three-way partition of the world became a political anachronism suggests a repression of sorts. Generalized prosperity operates as a concrete abstraction even as it has debatable accuracy as a “First World” norm. Today, we may be justified in saying, with Peter Worsley, that the Third World is not a myth; it is reality for us all.

Until the 1970s, economic growth was still very much understood to be a function of the state's capacity to manage its national economy. In keeping with the Weberian model of the rational-legal state, wealthier countries shared certain features of sociopolitical organization, possessing legitimate governments with a monopoly over violence, centralized bureaucracies, and a representative legislature.⁵⁰ Variations in relative socioeconomic stability were considered

⁴⁸ Carl E. Pletsch, “The Three Worlds, or the Division of Social Scientific Labor, Circa 1950-1975,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23, no. 4 (1981): 565–90.

⁴⁹ Peter Worsley, *The Three Worlds: Culture and World Development* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 339.

⁵⁰ Max Weber, *Economy and Society, Volumes 1 and 2*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

the effect of inevitable business cycles that could be contained through built-in countercyclical policies such as unemployment insurance and currency stabilization. Disparities between “first, second, and third worlds,” on the other hand, were explained in evolutionary terms as the effect of inadequate property and contract law, volatile class relations, and underdeveloped industrial infrastructure, all features which could be remedied by political reform and successive “stages of growth.”⁵¹ Less widely recognized at the time was the degree to which the terms of participation in global markets were skewed in favor of countries with a population that could afford to consume what it produced, a state of affairs made possible by a political compromise with labor, the externalization of inflationary pressures, and capital liquidity.⁵²

In fact, the remarkable postwar expansion of the global economy depended upon a monetary system with a built-in hierarchy of access to credit and enforcement of debt. Generous loans from the U.S. were instrumental to the reconstruction of the German and Japanese economies, which in turn provided America’s overheated industries with deep markets for capital and commodities through cross-border networks of production and exchange.⁵³ By placing conditional loans at the center of foreign policy through both bilateral agreements and intergovernmental institutions, the Truman administration leveraged the disproportionate

⁵¹ Introduced by economist Simon Kuznets, the theory of convergence was both operationalized and popularized by Walt Whitman Rostow, who would become John F. Kennedy’s National Security Adviser (and immediate predecessor to Henry Kissinger). See W. W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-communist Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960).

⁵² In 1960, one-third of all laborers in the United States outside agriculture had jobs in manufacturing, and 62 percent were unionized, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. For a systematic exposition of the structural particularities of this and the succeeding labor regime, see Bob Jessop, “Fordism and Post-Fordism: A Critical Reformulation,” in *Pathways to Industrialization and Regional Development*, ed. M. Storper and A.J. Scott (London: Routledge, 1992), 42–62.

⁵³ “U.S. governments Supported the Revival of Potential Economic Competitors—through Low-interest Loans, Direct Grants, Technological Assistance, and Favorable Trading Relations—So That They Could Sell their Products to the US,” in Sam Gindin and Leo Panitch, *The Making of Global Capitalism: The Political Economy of American Empire* (New York: Verso Books, 2013), 10.

strength of the American economy to dictate terms of participation in the global economy.⁵⁴ Aid programs like the Marshall Plan and its successor, the International Monetary Fund, were predicated on the adoption of liberal policies, such the relaxation of tariffs and the stabilization of exchange rates, which reconstituted financial markets around the dollar as the dominant store of value and unit of exchange.⁵⁵ From the Korean War forward, the United States was able to run a chronic balance of payment deficit that channeled capital from foreign borrowers, who maintained their currency reserves in dollars, into the military expenditures and public investments that “made America great.”⁵⁶ Foreign central banks had little choice in the matter, since refusal to buy those dollars would contribute to their depreciation, giving U.S. exporters a competitive advantage in international markets. Thus, while trade partners were required to balance their budgets in order to attract capital investments, the American financial sector operated like a debt machine, absorbing surplus income both home and abroad.

The collateral for a world’s worth of investment in the dollar was the American consumer. Generally speaking, the generation to come of age during World War II overcame the

⁵⁴ Gindin and Panitch, 11–12. In February 1947, President Truman presented the “Truman Doctrine” in an address before a joint session of Congress, justifying his request for \$400 million in military and economic assistance for Turkey and Greece as a matter of national security and global responsibility. “One of the primary objectives of the foreign policy of the United States,” said Truman, “is the creation of conditions in which we and other nations will be able to work out a way of life free from coercion.” During the next forty-two years of the Cold War, the meaning of “coercion” would include controls on the international movement of capital.

⁵⁵ This had not been the original intention; the planners at Bretton Woods had hoped that gold would serve as a neutral standard for the free convertibility of all currencies. However, the United States accounted for almost half of the world’s industrial production at the beginning of the 1950s, a situation which, combined with the collection of war debts, effectively depleted Europe’s gold reserves and threatened their money supply. The only currency strong enough to meet the rising demands for liquidity, the dollar became the de facto replacement for gold, creating a dollar shortage that threatened the expansion of international trade. This eventually led to the abandonment of the gold standard altogether in 1971. See Eric Helleiner, *States and the Reemergence of Global Finance: From Bretton Woods to the 1990s* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994).

⁵⁶ Michael Hudson, *Super Imperialism: The Economic Strategy of American Empire*, 2nd ed. (London: Pluto Press, 2003), 24–25.

shocks of poverty and war to raise children under conditions of unprecedented prosperity and political stability.⁵⁷ Significant public investment in health, education, welfare, and housing contributed to the entitlements of a “patrimonial middle class” with enough surplus income to pay off their loans and perhaps even retire in Florida.⁵⁸ The first- and second-generation immigrants of the Fordist period could count on a steady paycheck and an affordable mortgage made possible by relatively high wages, expanding consumer credit, and tracts of suburban development.⁵⁹ As the deprivations of the Great Depression faded into the past, debtors had no reason to doubt their claims of ownership to their property because they considered their income to be a function of prosperity based on a liberal creed of fundamental fairness. If they suffered “hidden injuries of class,” the indignity of performing unskilled work was mitigated by high hopes for their children, who would attend college in droves.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Between 1940 and 1960, GDP in the United States grew from \$200 to \$500 billion, and the majority of the labor force held white-collar jobs. In addition, government spending increased by a third.

⁵⁸ “Make no mistake: the growth of a true ‘patrimonial (or propertied) middle class’ was the principal structural transformation of the distribution of wealth in the developed countries in the twentieth century.” Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the 21st Century*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 261. Postwar workers not only enjoyed unprecedented accumulation of personal property—primarily through home ownership—but they were also the beneficiaries of President Johnson’s Great Society, a set of domestic programs launched in 1964–65 that sought to eliminate poverty and racial injustice. The War on Poverty introduced Food Stamps, Head Start, the Jobs Corps, Community Action Agencies, and an expansion of Social Security. Medicare, Medicaid, and the Older Americans Act were established, as well as major funding for education, transportation, public housing, consumer safety, and environmental protection. Anti-discrimination legislation included the Civil Rights Acts of 1964, 1965, and 1968; the Immigration and Nationality Services Act of 1965; and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities are also legacies of this period.

⁵⁹ On the institutionalization of consumer credit in the United States, see Lendol Calder, *Financing the American Dream: A Cultural History of Consumer Credit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

⁶⁰ Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (New York: Vintage, 1972). In their classic study of working-class families in Boston in 1969–70, sociologists Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb found that their white male informants struggled with self-doubt and a sense of inferiority relative to the professional class, even when they earned comparable wages, demonstrated expertise, and enjoyed relative security. Sennett and Cobb argue that this pervasive anxiety is a central psychological driver motivating productivity in a class society. In 1940, only 6 percent of men and 4 percent of women in the United States had completed four years of college, and the median of an eighth grade education for adults

Yet there is a dark side to this story that is equally relevant to my informants' experiences of race and class in Chicago. As African Americans joined the exodus to industrial centers of the Northeast and Midwest after World War I, housing discrimination became a powerful mechanism of apartheid.⁶¹ Black migrants from the American South had much in common with their European counterparts; fleeing the poverty and stagnation of a feudal caste system, "it was the first big step the nation's servant class ever took without asking."⁶² Unlike white immigrants, however, they met a highly qualified welcome, systematically excluded from neighborhoods deemed superior in housing stock and respectability. From the earliest days of the real estate market, segregation was a professional code of ethics among the builders, realtors, appraisers, insurance companies, mortgage bankers, and lending institutions—both private and public—of the housing industry. Government programs launched during the Depression to stimulate construction and address desperate housing shortages institutionalized the "redlining" of urban neighborhoods considered too risky for financing, a technique that quickly became an industry standard. "If a neighborhood is to retain stability," reads the 1938 Federal Housing Authority's Underwriters Manual, "it is necessary that properties shall continue to be occupied by the same

twenty-five years and older had remained fairly constant since 1910. By contrast, about 30 percent of the population born between 1946 and 1964 graduated from college. National Center for Education Statistics, *120 Years of American Education; a Statistical Portrait* (U.S. Department of Education, 1993).

⁶¹ Decimating the European economy, the First World War generated a huge demand for American agricultural and industrial products, even as it drew workers into the armed services. At the same time, hysteria surrounding communism and racial contamination fueled a series of legal restrictions on the entry of labor migrants and refugees, culminating in the Immigration Act of 1924. In response, employers drew from sources closer to home; in addition to African Americans, Mexicans became an increasingly important "reserve army" of labor. This replacement process was documented by agricultural economist and ethnographer Paul Taylor, who identified the Chicago-Gary region as a crucible of demographic change. By 1928, the labor force in steel was 12.3 percent African American and 9.4 percent Mexican, and in meatpacking 29.5 and 5.7 percent respectively. Aristide Zolberg, *A Nation by Design: Immigration Policy in the Fashioning of America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 255.

⁶² Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns* (New York: Vintage, 2011), 11.

social and racial classes.”⁶³ In tandem with restrictive covenants on private sales, mortgages with hidden “balloon” payments and “bundling” procedures, and open “blockbusting” intimidation, African American renters and debtors were steered into overcrowded, poorly maintained neighborhoods with designated schools, parks, recreational areas, stores, communities, churches, buses, YMCAs, restaurants, and even cemeteries.⁶⁴ Thus, policies designed to distribute risk by extending affordable credit had the perverse effect of circumscribing black participation in every aspect of civic life, foreclosing conditions of possibility for generations.

These practices of housing discrimination were so entrenched in Chicago that even Martin Luther King, on the heels of his victories in the South and at the peak of his moral authority, was unable to make headway in the campaign for open housing, suffering the most blistering defeat of his organizing career. What the Chicago Freedom Movement came up against in 1966 was not the “plantation politics” of an anachronistic feudalism, but a well-oiled machine of wealth extraction operated by unscrupulous landlords and speculators, protected by Mayor Richard J. Daley’s cunning and hegemonic political establishment and fueled by the aspirations of a racially-divided working class.⁶⁵ Black residents unable to qualify for credit were forced either to live in deteriorating apartment buildings or enter into a contract for a single-family

⁶³ United States Federal Housing Administration, *Underwriting Manual: Underwriting and Valuation Procedure Under Title II of the National Housing Act*, para. 937 (Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1938).

⁶⁴ On the institutionalization of housing segregation in the industrializing north, see Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

⁶⁵ Though it had limited impact on discriminatory practices in the city, the 1966 Chicago Open Housing Movement provided critical impetus towards the passage of the federal Fair Housing Act of 1968. On the other hand, the polarization of racial tensions during the Chicago campaign undermined popular support for the civil rights movement, generating political pressures that weakened federal legislation. See James R. Ralph, Jr., *Northern Protest: Martin Luther King, Jr., Chicago, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); and Darren Miles, “The Art of the Possible: Everett Dirksen’s Role in Civil Rights Legislation of the 1950s and 1960s,” *Western Illinois Historical Review* 1 (Spring, 2009): 86–119.

home far above the market price, at high interest, and with monthly payments that generally exceeded their ability to pay. Mark Satter, a lawyer who launched a crusade against this racket, estimated that 85 percent of the properties purchased by working class blacks in the 1950s were sold on contract, stripping them of their savings during the same period in which FHA- and VA-backed mortgages were subsidizing the formation of a new (white) middle class.⁶⁶ “I think the people from Mississippi ought to come to Chicago to learn how to hate,” King remarked after being hit on the head by a rock during a march in Marquette Park. Yet, as he would soon acknowledge with the Poor People’s Campaign, the racial conflict tearing up the city streets was driven less by irrational hatred than by the desire for economic security.⁶⁷

While the passage of federal Civil Rights legislation outlawed overt discrimination, the long-term sabotage of asset accumulation has structured African American citizenship. The gradual emergence of a black middle class modestly reduced segregation in most major cities.⁶⁸ Chicago was a notable exception to this trend, however; despite its significant diversity, it

⁶⁶ Beryl Satter, *Family Properties: Race, Real Estate, and the Exploitation of Black Urban America* (New York: Henry Holt, 2009), 4–5.

⁶⁷ Through nonviolent direct action, King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) hoped to focus the nation’s attention on economic inequality and poverty. “This is a highly significant event,” King told delegates at an early planning meeting, describing the campaign as “the beginning of a new co-operation, understanding, and a determination by poor people of all colors and backgrounds to assert and win their right to a decent life and respect for their culture and dignity.” SCLC, “Poor People’s Campaign,” press release, March 15, 1968.

⁶⁸ Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited discrimination in any program receiving financial assistance from the federal government. However, conventional loans and previously closed federal loans were excluded, limiting its impact to only .5 percent of the nation’s housing stock. While the 1968 Act expanded jurisdiction to all real estate brokers, builders, and mortgage lenders, enforcement was limited to complaints, litigation, and voluntary compliance, to be carried out by understaffed government agencies. In many parts of the country, racial steering is business-as-usual to this day. See Alexander Polikoff, *Waiting for Gautreaux: A Story of Segregation, Housing, and the Black Ghetto* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2006); Robert G. Schwemm, “Why Do Landlords Still Discriminate (and What Can Be Done About It)?” *John Marshall Law Review* 40 (2006): 455–511; and Fred Freiberg, “A Test of Our Fairness,” *The Urban Lawyer* 41, no. 2 (2009): 239–48.

remains one of the most segregated cities in the country.⁶⁹ During King's fateful stay at 1550 South Hamlin Avenue, the South Side was a battleground of violence against black residents, as "resegregation syndrome" drove an exodus of white flight westward. This pattern was established during the years of the Great Migration from the South: a "tipping point" of black residents would trigger the withdrawal of conventional lenders from a particular census tract, opening the field for speculators to buy up properties for sale through pay-as-you-go contracts. Buyers risked losing their entire investment if they missed payments; sellers stood to earn more from default than a full-term sale, through eviction and resale or by selling multiple contracts at a discount to investors on the secondary market. Subdividing and subletting properties to hedge the risk might lead to overcrowding, or at least the fear that it would spread among white residents as a self-fulfilling prophecy of devaluation.⁷⁰ Thus, financial institutions could set off a chain reaction that would cause a neighborhood to "turn over" the market. In "a city where wheeling and dealing created both millionaires and devastation as severe as that found in war zones,"⁷¹ working African Americans who were not shackled to properties they could not sell joined the exodus into the suburbs. In this way, "white flight" contributed to the parallel formation of a "black belt" of contiguous towns and neighborhoods with significant socioeconomic heterogeneity.⁷²

⁶⁹ In a comparison of discrimination trends between 1960 and 1980 among twenty-six cities with black populations of 100,000 or more, Chicago, Cleveland, St. Louis, and Philadelphia showed the highest rates of sustained segregation. Barry V. Johnston, "Housing Segregation of the Urban Black Population of the Midwest," in *Urban Housing Segregation of Minorities in Western Europe and the United States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 247. On current segregation dynamics in Chicago, see Robert J. Sampson, *Great American City: Chicago and the Enduring Neighborhood Effect* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

⁷⁰ Johnston, "Housing Segregation."

⁷¹ Satter, *Family Properties*, 12

⁷² See Mary Pattillo-McCoy, *Black Picket Fences: Privilege and Peril among the Black Middle Class* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 28. "These neighborhoods might well be considered vertically integrated. But even the predominately middle-class areas remain tied to the core ghetto.

In such a hyper-segregated setting, middle-class consciousness was less a reflection of how much one earned than where one lived. As one resident of a south suburb told Mary Pattillo-McCoy: “We don’t have where there’s a very large upper class. But there are classes. And some are divided on the basis of what they think they have, and what they think you don’t have.”⁷³ Location represents more than appearance, however; it also indicates access to opportunities for mobility. Thus, even as income gains among black professionals grew steadily, black unemployment rose to twice that of whites during the 1950s. Clustered in local personal services such as barbershops and beauty shops, cleaners, restaurants, grocery stores, and tailors, black businesses were hard hit by both the economic decline of inner-city neighborhoods and, ironically, the desegregation of the city’s downtown business district. Two decades later, deindustrialization decimated the black working class that had been stranded in the inner city by the dual housing market.⁷⁴

Over the course of the 1980s, working people throughout the United States lost the manufacturing jobs that had been their source of intergenerational mobility. Hanging onto the standard features of a middle-class lifestyle—house, car, and college education—required a two-parent income and a credit card. While new professional opportunities became available for educated women, those who had been working all along were carrying a greater share of

Administrative boundaries have no regard for the neighborhoods established by the black middle class. High schools service neighborhoods with a diversity of residents. Police districts are responsible for the residents of housing projects as well as those who live in owner-occupied single-family homes. Supermarkets, parks, nightclubs, scout troops, churches, and beaches all service a heterogeneous black population. Also, the poverty rates of the neighborhoods that make up Chicago’s black middle-class expanse range from a low of 7 percent to a high of 17 percent. The middle-class way of life is in constant jeopardy in black middle-class neighborhoods because of the unique nature of their composition and location.” The “sifting and sorting” of economic classes found in Pattillo-McCoy’s ethnography resembled the South Side dynamics described in 1945 by St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, *Black Metropolis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

⁷³ Pattillo-McCoy, *Black Picket Fences*, 14.

⁷⁴ Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*.

household economic responsibility while men were more likely to be thwarted in the attempt to master their destinies.⁷⁵ Christine Walley, an anthropologist from Southeast Chicago, recalls her mother's permanent "temp" clerical job as a kind of defeat, a loss of status in a world where "the meaning of being a good man or woman was linked to the kinds of families that people kept, the kinds of attitudes they displayed toward work, and how they related to one another." After the steel mills closed, a cloud of depression and despair settled over the entire region. "Yeah, we thought we were middle class there for a while," Walley's unemployed father would say. "We were almost middle class."⁷⁶

For white Chicagoans, the high visibility of concentrated poverty in dilapidated housing stock and high-rise public housing projects crystalized anxieties about the near future as hysteria about integration. Kathleen Augustine, vice chairman of the Southwest Parish and Neighborhood Federation, expressed this anguish in a 1983 letter to the *Chicago Tribune*: "If we appear insensitive to the poor, it is because we have been fighting for years against enormous and almost unbeatable odds to ensure our middle-income community's stability, viability, and safety ... facing the serious social and economic problems which are threatening to tear our beloved

⁷⁵ As consumers lost job security and buying power over the course of the 1990s, mechanisms for personal debt and investment—such as credit cards, individual retirement accounts (IRAs), and day trading—became increasingly widespread strategies of microeconomic management. These trends coincided with the replacement of industrial wage labor with services as the dominant framework organizing social interaction. See Randy Martin, *The Financialization of Everyday Life* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), and Dawn Burton, *Credit and Consumer Society*, (New York: Routledge, 2008). Anthropologist Katherine Newman documents the dissolution of the meritocratic fantasy with case studies suggesting a trend of downward mobility across the occupational spectrum during the 1980s: downsizing corporations eliminated middle management, unions lost political leverage with the air traffic controller's strike, and factories closed their doors on employees who had worked there for generations. Katherine S. Newman, *Falling from Grace: Downward Mobility in the Age of Affluence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

⁷⁶ Christine Walley, *Exit Zero: Family and Class in Postindustrial Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 53, 69, 71.

community apart.”⁷⁷ Ironically, Augustine’s letter was itself a “broken window,” a signifier communicating the perception of disorder that invited reaction. Yet contrary to her expectations, her beloved community of Marquette Park would be revitalized by an influx of new immigrants, most of whom were not white.⁷⁸ Likewise, black families were moving next door to white neighbors in the tree-lined suburbs of the postwar housing boom, like Amina’s neighborhood. The liberalization of commercial credit had created new opportunities to participate in the debt economy. However, this middle class did not enjoy the stability of their predecessors. Work was plentiful and entrepreneurs could do quite well with just a little capital, but wages were losing ground relative to the cost of living.

For two decades, the uneasy diversity of many Chicago neighborhoods suggested that the Second City was transitioning effectively from industrial center to global city of dreams. Beneath the surface of consumer spending, however, the security once provided by homeownership, retirement savings, health insurance, safety net programs, and a commons of public goods—from waste disposal and free parking to subsidized higher education—was being “securitized,” that is, transformed into assets that serve as collateral for financial securities.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Quoted in Alexander Polikoff, *Waiting for Gautreaux*, 168. This reaction was not confined to white working-class communities. Justifying its “urban renewal” policy in the 1950s, Chancellor Lawrence A. Kimpton of the University of Chicago declared that “it is not possible to operate and maintain a great university in a deteriorating or slum neighborhood. The very life of the University is at stake.”

⁷⁸ As Europe rebounded from the devastation of WWII, European emigration to the United States dropped substantially, with the exception of a surge of admissions from the post-socialist countries in the 1990s. Meanwhile, the passage of the Hart-Cellar Act of 1965 abolished the national origin quotas that had been put into place in the 1920s, opening the door to greater family-based migration from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Immigration from Latin America has increased even more significantly—and especially from Mexico—due to a complex set of factors that had less to do with admissions policies than with the intensification of attempts to cut off a flow generated by the displacement effects of the North American Free Trade Agreement. Douglas Massey et al., *Beyond Smoke and Mirrors: Mexican Immigration in an Era of Economic Integration* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2002).

⁷⁹ A security is the contractual right to an income stream—through taxes, fees, or monthly payments—that is generated by an object that belongs to someone else. A derivative is a form of security that prices the performance of that income stream over time. It speculates on a change in market price, whether the

Justified in moral terms as personal responsibility, the politics of austerity withdrew government investment in social infrastructure in order to continue supplying dollars to expanding capital markets without creating inflation. Behind the neoliberal rhetoric of ownership was the systematic replacement of property with debt, superseding a home economics predicated on the savings of past earnings with the far greater flexibility of cash now in exchange for debits paid forward. With the elimination of rules separating consumer and investment banking, debt obligations could be bundled to diversify exposure both within and across securities, making a range of products available to investors that both hedge risk and gamble on uncertainty. Investment in these instruments promotes liquidity by commodifying the future itself. This equal opportunity to credit translated into unequal exposure to risk and did not cause concern on the part of borrowers or lenders because as long as capital kept flowing through these continually expanding channels, it valorized itself by enacting confidence in a future in which all debts would get paid.

Most of my interlocutors arrived in Chicago during this period of socioeconomic expansion for the working poor. With easy access to loans, albeit with high interest rates and an assortment of related penalties, people without strong credit histories were able to buy homes and start businesses with relatively small down payments. “Greenlining” initiatives further opened up opportunities for the black middle class to recover property values in previously underserved communities. Lines became blurred between the patrons and employees of the ethnic restaurants and trendy boutiques of gentrifying neighborhoods. As rehab projects, new construction, and small businesses popped up everywhere, the boundaries within a city of

underlying asset gains or loses value. See Paul Langley, *The Everyday Life of Global Finance: Savings and Borrowing in Anglo-America* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008).

neighborhoods appeared to be less a matter of class than of culture, tantalizing in their diversity. This privatized renewal succeeded where urban planners had so often failed, drawing residents and investors into inner cities from suburbs that had lost their luster.⁸⁰ However, the decline of inner ring suburbs such as Harvey, Maywood Park, and Park Ridge suggested that all was not as it appeared in Bronzeville, Woodlawn, and Pullman.⁸¹ The restructuring of the relationship between labor and capital paralleled a widening divide between produced and inherited wealth at every scale of economic life.

This distinction became tragically evident in the shadow of the 2008 Recession, when many mortgage holders depending solely on earned income to make their payments found themselves without work and without assets. Unable to access their principal in a saturated market of equally desperate sellers, millions of people lost their life's savings. As for the city, an unemployment rate well over the national average, a persistent decline in property tax revenues, and a crippling budget deficit were the backdrop for a surge in violent crime and a police scandal that seethed with racism.⁸² Like the beneficiaries of HB 5783, people in struggling

⁸⁰ Bernadette Hanlon, *Once the American Dream: Inner-Ring Suburbs of the Metropolitan United States* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010).

⁸¹ Between 2000 and 2006, the percent of total subprime mortgages tripled from 12 percent to 36 percent. At the height of the credit boom, in 2006, 54 percent of African American, 47 percent of Hispanics, and 18 percent of white mortgage borrowers received a high-cost loan. Moreover, in census tracts where the population was at least 80 percent minority, 47 percent of borrowers obtained high-priced loans, compared with 22 percent of borrowers in communities where racial and ethnic minorities accounted for less than 10 percent of the population. In Bronzeville, for example, the percent of adjustable-rate home loans doubled from 23 percent to 48 percent between 2004 and 2006—a 109 percent increase—and then dropped to 15 percent by 2008. During those years, foreclosure rates increased 300 percent, to 8.1 percent of total loans, and property values fell from a median \$263,350 to \$210,200. See Derek Hyra and Jacob S. Rugh, “The US Great Recession: Exploring its Association with Black Neighborhood Rise, Decline and Recovery,” *Urban Geography* 37, no. 5 (2016): 700–26.

⁸² According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, in July 2016 official unemployment in the Chicago-Naperville-Elgin Metropolitan Statistical Area was 5.5 percent, compared with 5 percent nationwide. American Cities Project, *Fiscal Health of Large U.S. Cities Varied Long After Great Recession's End*, Pew Charitable Trusts, April 2016.

neighborhoods who were able to hang on to their homes watched the market value of their property plummet to reveal the flaw in the logic of symbolic capital.⁸³ The recession not only deprived them of their capacity to earn the living they deserved; it also exposed the infrastructure that had supported the illusion of ownership all along. Beneath the façade of American self-determination was a matrix of consumer credit and international debt, enforced by a militarized apparatus of police, border patrol agents, and “freedom fighters” who were committed to enforcing the viability of the dollar by any means necessary.

For African migrants, as for African Americans that survived the previous era of predatory lending, the subprime mortgage crisis was like a recurring nightmare. By some estimates, African Americans lost half of their aggregate wealth, and black homeownership dropped to its lowest rate in twenty years.⁸⁴ Thus, the socioeconomic landscape of post-recession Chicago resembled earlier cycles of boom-and-bust, as described by Patillo-McCoy in 1999: “The same stages that characterize the socioeconomic past and present of African Americans—overwhelming disadvantage, followed by progress and optimism, followed by stagnation and retrenchment—are mirrored in the spatial history (the *where*) of the black middle class.”⁸⁵ For my informants, this latest vortex of value extraction resonated with another, related history of postcolonial austerity and successive devaluations of currency, land, and labor. Blocks of abandoned and boarded-up buildings throughout the West and South Sides of Chicago and its inner-ring suburbs were the American equivalent of the deteriorating monumental architecture of

⁸³ Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. J. Richardson (New York: Greenwood, 1986), 241–58.

⁸⁴ According to the Census Bureau Survey of Income and Program Participation, the median white household held \$111,146 in 2011, compared with \$7,113 for black households and \$8,348 for Latinos. Sarah Burd-Sharps and Rebecca Rasch, *Impact of the U.S. Housing Crisis on the Racial Wealth Gap Across Generations* (Brooklyn, NY: Social Sciences Research Council, 2015).

⁸⁵ Patillo-McCoy, *Black Picket Fences*, 22.

the postcolonial cities. The former represented the loss of private wealth, surely, whereas the latter was evidence of the implosion of newly independent states. However, both were artifacts of foreclosure, painful souvenirs of an earlier, more optimistic investment in a long-awaited future. Swept up in the most recent disenfranchisement of American capitalism, migrants were themselves embodied collateral on bad loans of the past, compensating through their remittances for the withdrawal of Africa's wealth from the lives of its people.

Inexplicable Events

As the recession progressed and our fortunes failed to improve, both Amina and I applied for mortgage adjustments. By 2010, we had both been denied despite appeals and, in my case, the *pro bono* assistance of two eminent real estate attorneys. I found work with the Pan-African coalition in September of that year, both to conduct preliminary fieldwork on African immigration and to supplement my meager stipend as a graduate student. I had been told by my mortgage lender that grants and loans did not count as "earned income," and though I had carefully documented two years of deliberate evasion by Wells Fargo, my lawyers were having difficulty getting my case onto the overloaded docket of the Cook County court. Nevertheless, they were confident that they could prevent foreclosure based on my new job and the strength of my case.

The day that my condo was scheduled for auction, we held a press conference to release the results of a study documenting the systemic challenges facing African refugees in Illinois. According to the report, federal allocations for resettlement services had not kept up with inflation, and social workers had been hard pressed to find employment and affordable housing

for their largely monolingual, unskilled, and disoriented clients, even before the recession.⁸⁶ Mounting financial pressures were forcing agencies to close their doors or slash programming, such as English classes and job training, while cuts in state funding for mental health programs meant that patients were receiving superficial, short-term counseling even in cases of severe trauma. A member organization was hosting the event, which was well attended by reporters from major press outlets, coalition members, allied organizations, and even a few state and municipal officials. Refugees from Sudan, Congo, and Burundi had been invited to share stories of unemployment and eviction, domestic abuse, and long-term separation from children and parents left behind in refugee camps due to the indefinite suspension of family reunification cases from the region. Though African refugee admissions had decreased in recent years, family- and lottery-based migration was mounting steadily, and the Pan-African coalition had recently won a grant to ensure that they were represented in the 2010 Census. The hair braider bill was also on the verge of ratification.

Our small, hard-working and underpaid staff was in high spirits when we returned to the office. “The harder things get for us, the better they get for the organization,” Amina joked, though we both knew that promising developments were no guarantee of stability. Later that afternoon I was informed that my home had been sold for a third of its market value on the foreclosure market. My lawyers were incredulous. I was devastated. In consolation, Amina confided that the same thing had happened to her the month before. Like me, she had attempted to appeal her case, but there was nothing she could do. “They were never serious about negotiating an adjustment,” she concluded. “The bank wanted my house, and they took it.” She

⁸⁶ Shana Wills, “Retooling Systems: Enhancing the Integration of Refugees in Illinois,” *African Organization Policy Brief* 1, no. 2 (October 2010).

wasn't earning enough to rent an apartment large enough in a neighborhood safe enough for herself and her three teenaged boys, so she was planning to squat in her own home rent-free for as long as she could while she saved money and planned her next steps. She knew other people in her position who were able to hang on for a year or more before being evicted, so she was optimistic. She urged me to do the same.

At the time I was dumbfounded by her equanimity in the face of such a disaster. I had invested all my savings in my property, money that I would never see again, and I was sick with the symbolic failure of having violated a social contract. I was no longer creditworthy, a “toxic asset” in a world of winners and losers. Lauren Berlant has characterized this sense of generalized precarity as a structure of feeling, “an idiom for describing a loss of faith in a fantasy world to which generations have become accustomed.”⁸⁷ Having grown up in the waning years of Fordism, I was gifted with Treasury bonds by my Italian-American grandfather when I graduated from high school, proud evidence that his lifelong investment in America had produced dividends. Early members of the baby boom, my parents’ life trajectories have manifested the rewards of realizing one’s personal ambitions. Conscientious about discrimination, I nevertheless believed that my acceptance at a prestigious college was a reflection of talent and hard work and expected a promising career to issue from a quality education. In other words, though I acknowledged my relative privilege in a profoundly unequal world—and committed professionally to ameliorating these inequalities—I continued to operate under the working assumption that my circumstances were at least to some degree a reflection of my value, and that rational action would deliver rational ends.

⁸⁷ Lauren Berlant and Judith Butler, “Precarity Talk: A Virtual Roundtable,” *The Drama Review* 56, no. 4 (2012): 166. On “structures of feeling,” see Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), 128–35.

Yet as I came to know Amina and many other Africans who absorbed the brunt of the recession, I realized that my shame emanated from the rather hubristic fantasy that I could have prevented a fate shared by thousands. My African friends knew better. Like Amina, Karim had been encouraged by a mortgage broker within his own network to buy a modest house in the suburbs, where his family would have more space at a lower monthly payment than the apartment he had been renting in Chicago for years. The price was right, but their adjustable rate began to climb just as their entrepreneurial income dried up and the competition for wage-labor intensified. It was a bad risk, but they had been wary from the start. “The house belonged to the bank, really,” Karim told me. “Sure, I lost some savings, but it’s not the first time I made an investment that didn’t pan out.”

Karim had been making a good living with his brothers importing used car parts into Abidjan until corruption and growing political tensions convinced him to join his sister in Chicago in 1994. Since then, he has started and sold a number of businesses. “I always worked for myself,” he confessed. “I guess I don’t like taking orders from other people.” When he needed to earn extra money, he would get a job as a used car salesman or drive a cab.

I took a trip back home to buy a house for my mother and a restaurant for my brother, all with cash! But then I got married and my wife, she didn’t want to wait, so I took out a bank loan. I started thinking like an American, I guess. I should have borrowed from my brothers instead. Now I’m thinking of going home.

For many of my informants, the horizon of return softened the impact of hardships large and small. Even when circumstances were far worse in their countries of origin, the long-term prospect of a life more fully realized leavened stories-in-progress by reframing disappointments as temporary setbacks, life lessons, or even gifts in disguise.

In the midst of an event, however, the next right thing can lose its relation to intentions and interpretations. Indeed, an event is nothing but this interruption of the *habitus*. The social

field of play accommodates the contingency of change, offering pragmatic resources for improvising solutions to problems and incorporating the outcomes within a narrative frame. Beyond a certain limit, however, events disrupt the logic of sense, depriving the person of both the grounds for explanation and the certainty of self. Deleuze argues that the event has the structure of contradiction, which means it moves in two directions: putting history in crisis by exceeding the order of narrative, on one hand, and dissolving the coordinates of present being, on the other.

Personal uncertainty is not a doubt foreign to what is happening, but rather an objective structure of the event itself, insofar as it moves in two directions at once and insofar as it fragments the subject following this double direction. Paradox is initially that which destroys good sense as the only direction, but it is also that which destroys common sense as the assignation of fixed identities.⁸⁸

Thus, while Amina, like Karim, was able to adjust her near-future strategies to fit the reality of foreclosure, the shocks that followed would dispel her belief in the “is-ought fallacy.” When events are inexplicable, ethical action can mean giving up on expectations altogether.

In 2012, sending Moussa, Modibo, and Momar to New York City had seemed like the only viable option. They needed their father, new friends, a new beginning. But Cheik and the three boys were packed into a one-bedroom apartment on 116th Street in Harlem, and neither gifts nor scolding could prevent Modibo from immersing himself in the street life just outside his door. Moussa dealt with his brother’s restlessness by spending his free time on the basketball court. Their youngest brother, Momar, still in elementary school, kept himself occupied on the computer at home. Nevertheless, the farther afield Modibo wandered, the more punitive Cheik became towards all three of his sons, and the less capable he seemed of meeting the emotional

⁸⁸ Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester (London: Athlone Press, 1990), 3.

and logistical demands of parenthood. Amina was flying to New York at least once a month, and often more frequently to deal with routine issues and periodic emergencies.

In March 2013, Moussa was stabbed in the back by another boy in the neighborhood. When he got out of the hospital, he bought a gun on the street to defend himself and accidentally shot a friend in the arm. In the aftermath, Amina had worked with the other parents, doctors, police, and social workers to address the escalating violence in the neighborhood. They had organized events with a community center and the local mosque, and as people got to know each other, the tensions defused. She also developed relationships with the probation officers, pro-bono attorneys, teachers, tutors, coaches, and counselors with whom her sons had contact. It was obvious that the boys were seriously shaken. Moussa avoided conflict with his father by staying away and getting high with friends; his grades dropped and he was suspended from school sports, which made the situation worse. Afraid and depressed, Modibo was in therapy and had been showing improvement. He was charming and his teachers liked him, but he was also restless and easily bored. I was in New York for a meeting in February of 2015 when Amina called me from Chicago on a Saturday morning. The night before, Modibo had gone out to celebrate his birthday with friends. It was a school night. When he got home his father exploded, their confrontation got physical, and Cheik called the police. She asked me to post bail as soon as possible. Now that he was sixteen, he was no longer a minor and was being held with the adults at Riker's Island.

In all its shabbiness and arbitrary neglect, my encounter with the New York City criminal justice system was not unlike doing official business in Senegal. A fading art deco colossus with deteriorating concrete stairs and missing railings, the bail office at 100 Centre Street was a dingy yellow antechamber decorated with years of pencil graffiti. The pencils were scattered on the

floor like an invitation to add one's tag to the mural. I discovered why even the most proper parent would be tempted to deface city property while standing at the narrow bulletproof window, clouded with scratches, waiting for two police officers to finish their leisurely conversation and address me. The paperwork for Modibo's bond took six hours of inexplicable delay. "At least in Dakar you can bribe them to get the job done!" I texted Amina, who responded: "Oh, yes. I've stood there so angry I cry, but then I say to myself, would that resolve the problem? They don't have any supervision. Bureaucracy sucks everywhere. They make you feel like a criminal."

I visited Cheik that night. Momar answered the door and gave me a half-hug, awkward, abashed, and perhaps relieved that I had arrived. I had never seen his father so disheveled; he hadn't shaved and his eyes were red-lined under sagging lids. I had stepped into a situation in which we could not even pretend that all was well, yet he was the good host for a few minutes, offering me water or juice. He asked how long it had been since we've seen each other. A year-and-a-half? Two years? How long since I'd been in Africa?

"I don't know what to expect from these kids," Cheik told me, his energy flagging, his story spent. "In the morning I can't get them out of bed. I can't get them to school. You should see the notes I get from the teachers. For all of them, saying they were late, they missed this class, they didn't take that test. In Mali, what we would have done for their opportunity to be in school, but do I ever see them open a book? Talk about their homework with each other? They sit here watching television, playing video games, or they're out on the street with their friends. You wouldn't even know they were students, that they were thinking about their future." He shook his head in a regular, rhythmic motion, staring at a point on the floor just beyond my feet. "We always had trouble with that one. He's restless, that one."

“He’s not a bad boy,” I said. “I went to Senegal with him, remember? He loved being there”

“That’s true. He’s got an African heart. He should have stayed there.”

“But what’s there for him?” I asked. We sat in silence for a moment.

“I work so hard.” Cheik turned his hands up and stared at his palms. “I drive all day, all night, sometimes. All of the time, I work. And every day they ask me—Dad, I want ten dollars for a snack, twenty dollars there—and I give them what they want. They have the newest iPhone, the video games, the gym shoes. And then they don’t listen. They don’t act like they should.”

Cheik did not press charges and things calmed down for a while. Moussa won a basketball scholarship to a community college in the Hudson Valley, although he still had to repeat a class in summer school to graduate. Modibo passed the eleventh grade with a B average and was enrolled in a work study program for the summer. Amina’s house in the suburbs finally sold, so she sublet a one-bedroom apartment near her salon. She was anxious to relocate in New York, but the distractions of the year had forced her to drop a class that she needed to graduate. Momar came to Chicago for the summer to help her out with her booth at the festivals; she enrolled him in a basketball camp and took him to Koranic school on Fridays. Then two of Modibo’s friends were arrested for robbing a bodega in East Harlem, and he was implicated. The security camera showed that he had been standing outside. The ringleader had been Degrateze, the boy who Moussa had accidentally shot in the arm. Had he been the one to supply Moussa with the gun in the first place? Modibo’s lawyer concurred with Amina that this was an excellent time for Modibo to visit his grandmother in Dakar. Amina borrowed money from the *ésusu* to enroll him in a private school for American expats.

This meant that she would need to stay in Chicago for at least another six months to earn enough money to pay her debts. In addition to her *ésusu* loan, she had been saddled with an \$8,000 bill from the Internal Revenue Service. Though Cheik had agreed that Amina would claim her boys on her taxes and share the return, he had neglected to share this information with the friend who helped him with paperwork. By the time he realized why his check from the IRS had been so generous, the money was already spent. However, financial troubles notwithstanding, the autumn of 2015 was a hopeful time. Cheik was calmer, and Momar was more focused now that his brothers were gone. Moussa was one of the best players on his basketball team, and though he had a difficult time with his coursework at first, he took advantage of tutoring and finished his first semester of college on the honor roll. He came home for the winter break feeling hopeful.

Then Moussa was arrested and sentenced to six months in jail. Preoccupied with finishing high school, he had neglected to complete a training program that had been ordered by the court in 2013. The District Attorney had decided to pursue the case as part of a sweeping anti-gang initiative.⁸⁹ Though Moussa had kept his distance from Modibo’s friends, the prosecutor was convinced that they had both been involved in the bodega robbery. Amina also found that while Moussa’s teachers and counselor were concerned about his well-being, his basketball coach was angry that Moussa had not informed him about his court case. “How was I supposed to know he was missing practice for court dates?” he asked her. He had found out about Moussa’s legal troubles from the DA and assumed that he was up to no good. “I’ll be sorry to lose such a good player,” he told her, as though Moussa’s fate had been sealed. Neither Amina nor I could

⁸⁹ See Babe Howell and Priscilla Bustamante, *Report on the Bronx 120 Mass “Gang” Prosecution* (New York: City University of New York School of Law, 2019), <https://bronx120.report>.

imagine that Moussa would be taken out of college when he was doing so well. However, unlike his brother, Moussa did not receive effective legal counsel. The public defender arrived in court unprepared, having neglected to arrange a deal with the DA. “You’ve got to step up your game before they send your kid to state prison!” the judge told Amina, and then they sent him anyway. He was sentenced to sixteen months.

Moussa’s social worker recommended a “boot camp” that would shorten his time to six months so that he could return to school in September. In jail, Moussa began praying five times a day and observed a rigorous training schedule to keep up his game. When Amina visited him, she was pleased that he had been allowed to share a cell with two other Africans; they seemed to be looking out for each other. An African American correctional officer congratulated her for raising such a respectful and obedient son. However, he had not been enrolled in the accelerated remedial program because his eligibility was not specified on his sentencing document, an oversight on the part of both the judge and his attorney that was not easily remedied.

Meanwhile, Modibo announced that he would rather return to the United States and do time than live in exile one more day. He was detained at the airport and sent directly to Riker’s Island, although he was not arrested or charged with a crime for four months because the DA couldn’t gather enough evidence against him. “I don’t understand how the legal system works in the United States,” Amina told me. She had met a dozen African mothers whose boys were in jail on questionable charges. Riker’s Island had been featured in the press quite often: *Rikers Inmate Says Guard Performed Unauthorized Cavity Search; Where Mental Illness Meets Brutality in Jail; Major Takedown Nets 17 Arrests, Including Corrections Officers; As Long as the City of New York Has Owned Riker’s Island, Since the 1880s, It Has Been a Place for the*

Unwanted. “It was a slaughterhouse for pigs before it was a prison,” she remarked. “They are treated like animals. And then that is what they become.”

At the beginning of September, when Moussa should have been back in school, his cellmate called her in a panic. “They’ve beat up your son so bad I don’t know if he’s alive or dead,” he told her. “You’ve got to come. They did this to a couple Guinean boys, and their families never came, and I don’t know what ever happened to them.” It was hard for Amina to talk about what it was like to see him. It took her three hours to drive there, and the prison officials were not prepared to see her. They had put Moussa in solitary confinement. She would have to wait. She insisted, and eventually they led her into a room full of narrow boxes, like phone booths. She had to talk to him through a window. His hands were fastened behind him and his face was bruised, his eye swollen shut. He told her that the correctional officer had tried to gouge out his eye. What happened? He told her that they were coming in after playing basketball, and he wasn’t moving fast enough. That’s what the CO (corrections officer) said before he started swinging. Moussa tried to defend himself and then more guards came, shoving and kicking. They beat him until he passed out, while all the others watched in silence. “Just be sure to look for me,” he told his mother. “They get you lost in the system. They make you forget who you are. That’s how it works.” When she called his Malian cellmates, they confirmed his story. “He never did anything. We all saw it happen. They just attacked him. There was blood everywhere. There’s nothing you can do.”

When Amina called legal aid, they listened sympathetically and sent a lawyer to take pictures and ask some questions. The lawyer told her that Moussa had been given a Tier 3 ticket for assaulting a correctional officer. This allegation was handled through an internal disciplinary process that was not subject to judicial review. Since Moussa was no longer a minor, he would

have to file a complaint on his own behalf in order for them to investigate further. Nevertheless, they would monitor the situation and take action if they kept him in “the box” for more than a month. Then he disappeared. When Amina called the prison, they told her they didn’t know where he was. “I don’t think I’ve ever felt so depressed,” she told me. “No one cares if they live or die. And there’s nothing I can do.” Two weeks later, the state correctional website indicated that he had been transferred to a maximum security prison near the Canadian border, six hours from New York City. From the social worker at the new facility, she learned that he was still was in a special housing unit (“the SHU”), which meant that he could not leave his individual cell or make phone calls. The social worker was surprised that Moussa was under such harsh conditions. “This happened in the other facility, so there’s not much we can do, but your son seems to be such a nice guy!”

Amina was also in touch with Moussa’s cellmate, who was having trouble sleeping after what happened. He told her that most of the prison staff were white and seemed to target the African kids. Moussa kept to himself and was serious about basketball. He had also been going to *jumaa*, a prayer group that brought in an imam every Friday. One day, that CO had pulled him aside and told him, “I really don’t like you,” but it seemed to come out of nowhere. The cellmate testified at the internal hearing, though the eight other witnesses were afraid to speak. Amina also spoke with the legal aid attorney, who confirmed that her office was assisting Moussa in challenging the ticket. The 250 days that he had served before the incident had been annulled, and his sentence could be extended to as long as four years. His parole date had also been deferred from November until April. However, there were grounds for throwing it out: they had held him in the box for fourteen days without a hearing.

After Moussa's incident, Amina gave up on trying to challenge Modibo's conviction. His lawyer and the DA worked out an agreement that he would serve a total of one year and then be released into a training program without probation. When he was eventually convicted, he was sentenced as a youthful offender, which meant his record would be expunged. "The sentence they gave me isn't right!" Modibo exclaimed to his mother, and he went to the law library every day to investigate his case. She laughed at this, glad that he was finally paying attention to his situation. Although Riker's Island was a treacherous environment, Modibo was less vulnerable than his brother. He knew how to handle himself and had already served half his sentence. He would be out before his eighteenth birthday in February. I got the same impression when I visited him. Located in the city where his girlfriend could visit him and living in the general population, Modibo seemed at ease with his routine. "It's regular in here," he told me.

I mean, people say all kinds of things are going on, and it's true that there's conflict, but there's conflict on the street too. The thing is that here, it's all street all the time. Everything gets turned upside down, and if you act the way you think you're supposed to act, that's when you get in trouble. You've got to know how to hold your own but also when to give in. It takes some getting used to.

Modibo said it was a challenge to plan for the future in a world that seemed so far away.

In here, it's all about who you know. To tell you the truth, sometimes I think the COs are more afraid of the inmates than the other way around. Some people say that there's one inmate that runs the whole show. He's got all the money he needs to make you disappear. The COs are so corrupt in here, they'll do whatever he says.

Modibo didn't presume to know who this shadowy underworld figure was, or necessarily believe in his existence. It was like an urban legend, animated by the wish that some single person could command that kind of power, as though the chaos surrounding him might have some inscrutable logic of its own. I asked him about his bright green jumper, which was color-coded for gang affiliation. "Well, they know I'm tight with Degameze, so they gave me one of those jumpers too. Because we're, well, we're influential."

I was having trouble reconciling the affectionate boy I have known since childhood with the thug in the surveillance video who had waited in the wings while his friends pointed a gun at an innocent cashier and ran off with a drawer full of cash. Like many African men, he was most at home as part of a brotherhood in which the performance of masculinity was central to the maintenance of status and trust. This propensity to seek himself in the eyes of others had been getting him into trouble since he was twelve years old. “He’s a follower, not a leader,” his lawyer had said to me, “and does not exercise the best judgment in choosing whom to follow.” But I could also understand why, from the perspective of a teenage boy with diffuse powers of concentration, a brash, charismatic risk-taker like Degameze might seem like a better bet than a hard-working taxi driver like his father, who never seemed to get ahead.

Later that week, I accompanied Amina and Momar to visit Moussa. We left the south Bronx some time before midnight on a bus packed with women and children traveling upstate. During her last trip, Amina had befriended a young Honduran woman named Ceci, who took the very last seat beside me, plugging her phone into the USB port in the ceiling and settling down with a letter in Spanish, on the same lined paper that Moussa’s letter had come on. She read it over and over as though memorizing the words. Amina told me later that her husband was arrested a week after their wedding for selling marijuana. He was in the last week of his time in another facility when the other inmates jumped him. This is apparently a strategy long-timers will use, along with planting weapons and spreading rumors with the COs, in order to hold onto short-timers. When there are fights among inmates, no effort is made to determine who is at fault—they are all punished. Ceci’s husband was sent to the SHU, which was distressful yet also a relief because he was undocumented and about to be deported.

The bus began dropping off passengers on the prison circuit while it was still dark, watchtowers blinking in the night. Our stop was the last, with the largest number of visitors carrying bags full of regulation clothes and gifts. The waiting room bathroom was crowded with women brushing teeth, changing clothes, and fixing hair, a flurry of makeup and makeovers, perfect faces for their captive men. There is camaraderie among people who love people who are prisoners. For a moment, we were afraid that Momar would not pass the gauntlet of security because his sweat pants had zippers on the sides, until someone lent him another pair. We hadn't brought enough quarters for the vending machines, but other visitors were prepared and willing to share.

The men were waiting in a large room with rows of stools enclosed in wire mesh. Moussa had lost weight since I saw him last; he told us they didn't get enough food. I expected him to be angry, nervous, desperate for company, but he seemed quite calm, resigned to his fate, even optimistic that his living conditions would gradually improve. He was no longer in shackles; there were four levels of security, and he had graduated from level one to two, which meant he was permitted to buy snacks and soda. He was also in a larger room with a roommate after being in solitary for two months. There were earphones and a dial to certain stations, so he could listen to basketball games. His bed was too short and his feet stuck off the end, but the linens got changed every week. Since he couldn't leave his cell, anything he needed was ordered from a CO. They were not particularly intimidating or disrespectful because there were surveillance cameras everywhere. Moussa nodded through the window at the cluster of guards sitting and standing around the station behind the glass. "You never know about them really. They may be just as scared as we are." They were all white. Every one of the inmates was black or Latino.

"You still playing?" Moussa asked, nodding at Momar's t-shirt from basketball camp.

“Over the summer, I was,” Momar replied.

“Too much basketball,” said Amina. “He doesn’t know how to prioritize. He’s so smart, but his grades could be a lot better!”

Moussa asked him about his new school, a Catholic college prep in the Bronx. “They’re full of rules, and if you don’t wear your uniform or if your hair is too long, they send you home. It’s a good school, though. They sent some kid to Princeton.”

“Listen to Amina,” said Moussa. “You don’t want to wind up like us! Take your schoolwork more seriously and don’t get too excited about the basketball tournaments and exhibition games. Save your energy for the team during the season.”

“*In’shalla*,” said Amina.

A man with a crocheted skullcap was escorted into the box, and Amina asked Moussa if he was Muslim. “I don’t think so, mom. They like to wear them because it keeps their hair covered and they don’t have to worry about taking care of it.”

“Are there other Muslims in here, do you think?”

“Probably, but I wouldn’t know.” He told us that in the general population prisons, inmates came together at prayer services, recreational time, and mandatory activities like anger management and addiction classes. But here, the only person you got to see was your cellmate.

“Is that better or worse than being alone?” I asked him.

“I like him alright. He’s an older guy and he’s been here for a long time. He’s quiet and wise. We talk about things.” He told us that it wasn’t so lonely because people talked to each other through the walls. Also, there was an outdoor area called “the cage” that they entered, one at a time, for a few minutes every day. “While you’re there, people call out to you and talk to you. You can’t see them directly but if they stand in a certain way you can see their reflection in

the window.” Some people would cast “the line” into the cage, fishing for notes or drugs. “Sometimes they send pictures so that you can see what they look like.”

At the vending machines, the women were queued up before three battered microwave ovens, sharing tips on how to transform unappetizing morsels wrapped in cellophane into offerings of home. “I wish I could bring some real food for my baby!” someone said, dropping quarters into a machine. “Careful with that one,” someone else warned her. “It just stole my dollar.” A little girl dropped a bottle of orange soda and then tried to open it, spraying everything in sight. Two, three, then six women cleaned it up with paper towels, telling her it was alright. “My kids would never eat microwave food at home,” said one of them, fingering the silver cross around her neck. “But my son loves this chicken the way I make it.” She lived in Rochester and stayed in a Red Roof Inn so that she could visit both Saturday and Sunday, every other week.

“My son-in-law, he doesn’t even know why he’s in here!” said another woman in a yellow sweater. “He says he was set up.” He had been in an addiction class, participating in a discussion about alcoholism and marijuana. “I’ve heard that sex can be an addiction,” he had said, which offended the female teacher. She brought him into her office, told him he had an attitude, and gave him a ticket.

“My son was set up too!” exclaimed the woman from Rochester. “His roommate got into an argument with another inmate, and there was a tussle. It was the roommate’s fault, but they gave my son a Tier 3 ticket. I didn’t know what that was so I looked it up and it was the most serious offense possible! I asked him, ‘What did you do?’ and he told me, ‘I didn’t do nothing, ma! I swear!’ His roommate wanted to do the right thing and take the fall, but then he got slammed with another ticket out of nowhere and couldn’t do anything. They’re just giving out tickets at random. They don’t care what really happened, they just want to keep them scared.”

The woman in the yellow sweater shook her head. “A lot of those COs, you know, they’ve just come straight out of the war. They need counseling! Instead, they get jobs at these places, and they take out their anger and their confusion on the inmates, especially the younger ones. My son just turned twenty-one on August 8.”

“My son turned twenty-one on August 4!” cried the woman from Rochester.

“Mine turned twenty-one last month,” said a third. “It happened right before his birthday. I drove up from New York, and they told me that I couldn’t see him. I was devastated.”

Amina, who had joined us by this time, told her that Moussa been at the same facility. “Moussa?” she asked. “I think my son knows him!” A pattern was emerging: young inmates with short sentences were being sent to the SHU on trumped up charges that couldn’t be verified. They had all been told by their public defenders that they could do nothing once they were inside. She returned with us to see Moussa, who was talking to his brother. “Jerome says hi!” she said, and Moussa smiled happily. “I didn’t know about his transfer! Now he lives in a different cellblock than I do, so we don’t ever see each other.”

Ceci came over with some chicken for us and pointed out her husband from across the room. He waved. “The last time I was here, they took a man back to his cell because he and his girlfriend were touching too much, right there!” She pointed to the six-inch opening at the bottom of the grate. I noticed that many couples rimmed the opening with paper towels for kissing through. Across from us, a woman with a little boy and two toddlers lifted the youngest onto the ledge so that her daddy could tickle her feet. I was surprised by how well-behaved the children were, never straying far from the bench, mostly pressed up against the mesh to be close to him. The room was humming with conversation. “That’s what Trump would say!” one of the inmates shouted, and his visitors laughed out loud. I asked Moussa if people were talking about

the election. “That’s all they’re talking about!” he said. “But I don’t imagine they’re ever going to let inmates vote.”

“If Trump wins, that’s the end for me!” said Amina. “I’m packing up and moving back to Dakar for sure! You boys are welcome to come with me.”

Gradually, the energy from the early conversation dissipated. We had six hours to spend together in that room, and time slowed down as the afternoon advanced. They talked about friends from 116th street. Some of them were in college now. Others were in jail. “Tell Modibo not to let anybody know how much time he’s got,” Moussa told us. “That’s information that nobody shares. That and the story of whatever got them into the system in the first place.” He told us that people would talk about what happened to them once they were inside, but not the original break. It was as though a transformation had taken place. You were no longer the person you had been out there; you learned to live according to different rules. Moussa seemed so much better now, as though he had made the adjustment to this new reality and had learned to make the best of it. The stresses and expectations of the future were put into abeyance, and in this smaller frame, simple pleasures like a visit from his mother, a basketball game, and a good book took on a whole new meaning. Yet his equanimity also worried me. His dissociation from shock and distress would not survive his reentry into the chaos of the world.

“I’ll come back the weekend after next,” Amina promised when it was time to leave. We each squeezed his hand in turn, and fell in with the flow of people moving towards the door. A little girl was crying, “Why can’t Daddy come with us?”

“Wait!” said Momar, and ran back to his brother, who was still sitting on his stool with the rest, watching us disappear from view. “What was that?” Amina asked when he returned. “I wanted to tell him I love him,” Momar replied.

The bus left in a timelier manner than it had arrived, winding on misty country roads already flanked with piles of melting snow, over a landscape of low ridges and farmland, with trees on the far side of turning. Boxy prefab houses, trailers, the sagging remains of modest Victorians seemed bleak under low, steel-colored clouds. We passed a barn with TRUMP hand-painted in red over the peeling white boards. The bus made stops at four other prisons in a row, the last one at the top of a hill crowned by an elaborate nightmare of a complex in grey stone, complete with a turreted castle and a workhouse, an artifact from an earlier era of social engineering. Finally on the expressway, rolling hills were scattered with hi-tech windmills like propellers steering the planet. As the light faded, everyone on the bus nodded into sleep or stared at their smartphones in the dark.

The Failure of the Gift

Amina had urged Cheik to join us on our trip upstate, but after visiting each of his sons once, he would not repeat the experience of seeing them behind bars. It didn't help that he was barely literate, and the only way to communicate with Moussa was by writing letters. He compensated by sending them money like clockwork, though he was constantly fretting about bills. "I've got to say that he takes care of his boys," Amina told me many times. This had always been his way of valuing them, even when they were small. If this parenting strategy fed a bottomless appetite for cash and commodities, it also conformed to the logic of migrating for your kids and compensated for his lack of accomplishment in other ways. He couldn't help them with their homework or even have a conversation without feeling disrespected. But as long as he could spread money around, he was rich in people.

This source of self-esteem was drying up, however. Cheik had not been able to leave the United States since he arrived in 1991. Having adjusted her own status since their divorce, Amina remarried him so that he could finally attain permanent residency. The application was rejected, however, because he had married another woman before his divorce with Amina was finalized, annulling their remarriage. His legal status hung by the thread of a work permit that Amina had been sure to renew annually, pending a decision on a suspension of deportation that had dragged on for years. Then, having insisted on taking charge of his own affairs, he missed the deadline and lost his work permit, which was denied the following year under the more stringent criteria of the Trump administration. Thus, he was back to working under someone else's name, reminded every day that he was a man in exile.

To make matters worse, his earnings as a taxi driver were also declining steadily, what with Uber competition and the tickets that kept appearing in the mail, thanks to the surveillance cameras scattered throughout the city. When Amina finally relocated to New York, her entry-level position as a caseworker at a social service agency did not earn nearly the income that hair braiding had, at least in the good years. Thus, they had no choice but to pool their income and live together. At first Cheik had been gracious and accommodating, but as the stressful months wore on, he began reacting to her competence with the distrust of generalized paranoia. "Cheik is going through a crisis today," she told me one Sunday morning. "He thinks I've got thousands of dollars stashed away somewhere, and he blames me for everything that's wrong. He's depressed about what's happened to the boys, but it's also his fault."

"It's always the mother's fault!" we said together, because it was best to laugh. We were on 125th Street looking for thermal underwear for Modibo, who was complaining that it was always cold with all that concrete in jail. Colors weren't allowed, so we went from store to store

trying to find something that was white. She looked tired; she had taken a second job as a security guard at Delta and had worked a 12-hour day on Saturday. When we found what we were looking for, she called a livery driver she trusted to take us to Riker's. As their chatter oscillated between Wolof and French, I gathered that she didn't know him very well and was sharing just enough personal information to secure his sympathy and support. She was very practiced at this, protecting her privacy without ever appearing cagey. We stopped at the apartment, and Cheik came down with a bag full of things for Modibo—a thermos, a blanket, some shoes.

“Lisa! Thank you thank you thank you!” he exclaimed when he saw me, and gave me a big hug. I was never sure what it was that he was thanking me for. I sensed that he was embarrassed because I knew his true source of shame. Like Modibo, Cheik was a gregarious person who was happiest socializing with other men. He acknowledged his abusive behavior towards his family with chagrin, perhaps, yet he was also quick to justify his outbursts as an expression of self-respect, his violence a virile defense of his pride. But he had no defense against the agency of his children. Lately he had been isolating himself, and she worried that he was coping with his sense of powerlessness by drinking alone. Whenever he went to the old neighborhood, people would ask about the boys with that knowing look in their eyes. She told me that a few weeks ago an old friend had showed him a video of his son playing basketball on scholarship. “He just crumpled up inside. And then it starts: ‘Everybody’s doing so well and look at me, with two sons in jail. How can it be?’ That’s Cheik for you.”

Amina’s enduring empathy for Cheik, despite so much abuse, was a dark mirror of her own pain. She remained entangled in networks wherever she lived because they encompassed both time and place. Walking through Harlem or Dakar by her side, we were stopped every few

blocks to greet someone with whom she had a long, tangled history. These connections had survived bankruptcies, foreclosures, divorces, deportations, and even incarcerations. But disgrace was a form of hardship that brought out the worst in oneself and others. “You know how African women are,” she told me during our trip upstate. “They love to talk. And then before you know it, you’re walking down the street and people are avoiding you because they don’t want your bad fortune to wear off on them. It makes you want to hide.” Modibo’s and Moussa’s notoriety affected everyone in the family, including Momar, who struggled with the dissonance between their enhanced reputation among his peers and their criminalization by the authorities. One afternoon he ran into two policemen just outside his building on his way to the laundromat. “What do you have in that bag?” they demanded. “Aren’t you the brother of Modibo and Moussa? Put your hands up!” They patted him down and asked him questions about his daily life, as though he were a suspect.

The simultaneous incarceration of two of Amina’s and Cheik’s three sons constituted a moment of failure in the circulation of trust that held their lives in place. This had not been true of foreclosures, loss of income, and deportation. It was hardly a revelation for most of my informants that institutions were indifferent to migrants without wealth and status. Indeed, the sense of shared abjection was a powerful moral bond that enhanced the resilience of the safety net. The success of HB 5783 and the robust participation in the associations that came out of that campaign were evidence of the frequency with which friends and relatives were already enacting relations of mutual aid. In this sense, political action was less about the achievement of a goal—which was, in fact, losing its utility under changing economic conditions—than it was about arbitraging an opportunity to instantiate the network, making time for the hair braiders to pursue other options. However, the same conditions that animated participation in the network put its

members under stress that approaches a limit, as it does during the societal breakdown in Congo that I discuss in the next chapter. The freedom to make a sacrifice for another activates the compulsion to reciprocate—what Marcel Mauss called *hau*, the spirit of the gift.⁹⁰ The *hau* drives a continuous cycle of giving and receiving, loaning and borrowing, that is distinguished from buying and selling by a temporal deferral and the disavowal of an expectation that the gift will be returned. This is the defining contradiction of the gift, an indeterminate suspension within the concept that both extends and limits the affective economy that it constitutes.

The gift shares the structure of the event: it is a unique act that participates in the reproduction of a *habitus*. Derrida elaborates on the implications of “given time” as a gift that keeps on giving by suspending the possibility of its negation: the instantaneous exchange that clears the books. As expressed in the oxymoron of “gift exchange” as well as the contronyms for “give and take” or “buy and sell” in many languages, this is a concept that expresses both a stable opposition and its indeterminate identity. It is an equivalence of nonequivalence and equivalence that operates in the context of ordinary speech as a distinction that leaves open a possibility of effacement. “This contradiction is the logical and chronological form of the impossible simultaneity of two times, of two events separated in time and which therefore cannot be given at the same time.”⁹¹ Gift exchange requires a tacit agreement on the part of both giver and receiver that would be annulled by the demand of a counter-gift or the failure to reciprocate in some way. This mutual disavowal of expectations is expressed as generosity and gratitude, an affective response to the transfer of excess that suspends the fulfilment of intentions. When it

⁹⁰ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London: Routledge, 2002), 14.

⁹¹ Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: Counterfeit Money*, trans. P. Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 32.

works, gift exchange is an act of arbitrage that structures time by both creating a temporal interval and bridging it, tacitly, with the experience of community. In Guyer's terms, it regulates the "near time" relation between the punctuated time of the event and the continuous time that points towards a horizon of aspiration.⁹² However, while the terms of the counter-gift are never specified, the perceptions regulating participation in this affective circuit are sensitive to the circumstances facing its members. From within the network of relationships that Amina had labored to sustain, the criminalization of her sons represented the failure of the gift to deliver on its obligations.

The isolation experienced so abruptly by Amina and her family revealed the contingency of any gift and its contradictory relation to the presupposition of gift exchange as a system that circulates trust as community. Disgrace is a point of intransitivity within a network, the failure of reciprocity that is not registered as a trace in the memory of its members.⁹³ Malicious gossip is like a bad credit rating; it is a symptom of resentment, an index of volatility, a representation of diminished value.⁹⁴ Like dropped stitches, such moments can be detected in the aporias of the stories I tell—the conditions under which Amina left the Pan-African coalition, for example, or the circumstances under which Moussa acquired a gun. The connections not made and explanations demurred may mark a limit of resilience within a network, a withdrawal of network security that only exists as potential to be realized in an event itself. Yet disappointments and lingering bitterness may also be left unsaid in order to leave options open. The informal jury of

⁹² "The thing is not in time; it is or it has time, or rather it demands to have, to give, or to take time—and time as rhythm, a rhythm that does not befall a homogeneous time but that structures it originarily." Derrida, 41.

⁹³ On the invisibility of the forbidden triad, see Nan Z. Da, *Intransitive Encounter: Sino-U.S. Literatures and the Limits of Exchange* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

⁹⁴ Michel Feher, *Rated Agency: Investee Politics in a Speculative Age*, trans. Gregory Elliot (New York: Zone Books, 2018), 85.

the network communicates inconsistently and changes minds, failing to reach consensus. Rather than settling scores and burning bridges, ambiguity leaves space open for relations to resume or new bridges to be built. Amina's networks were both there and not there, instantiated when a relation was activated and absent when a call was not returned, a promise forgotten, a counter-gift deferred. Yet even at the nadir of her fear for her sons, she knew that a logic of sense would resume one day, although she doubted that she would believe, ever again, in the reliability of the near future.

With respect to the state, however, the exclusion of Amina's family from the benefit of the doubt was quite explicit. From the moment that Moussa and Modibo were first arrested, they became scapegoats, a target of opprobrium that served to reinforce a fraying sense of social security. Judging by the practice in Modibo's grade school of segregating children with special needs, Moussa and Modibo were already suspect, tarnished, and unqualified for generosity before they faced the outraged neighbors of Amina's south Chicago suburb. This pattern was repeated by Moussa's lawyer, basketball coach, and correctional officer, not to mention the District Attorney, who had decided on the basis of a statistical profile that Moussa's incarceration served the interests of the community. For him, the possibility that Moussa was selling drugs at his community college upstate was more compelling than the prospect of his college degree or basketball career. This incompatibility between Moussa's interests and those of public security follows from the libertarian position that negative rights are separable from positive ones. Whether the common good is understood as a means to an end—such as the DA's political career— or as an end in itself, it represents an ideal that disavows the difference that sustains it. Unlike Amina's social network, which suspended that difference as an extended obligation, the state made a *prima facie* determination of guilt, foreclosing the possibility of

negotiation. Whatever degree of responsibility Moussa and Modibo might have for their crimes, they were condemned long before they presented before a judge.

It is evident that Moussa and Modibo were subjected to a juridical politics of exception. As Giorgio Agamben argues, sovereignty instantiates itself by exercising authority over what it cannot control. No rule of law, however nuanced or inclusive, can capture the full particularity of the individual case. Nor can it encompass the “bare life” of existence, a being born into debt for the gift of life.⁹⁵ “Guilt refers not to transgression,” he writes, “that is, to the determination of the licit and the illicit, but to the pure force of the law, to the law’s simple reference to something.”⁹⁶ According to this logic, defendants are targeted by the state due to a relative lack of positive attributes that would indicate “a form or way of living proper to an individual or a group.”⁹⁷ Cheik would, perhaps, agree with this assessment. In his volatile conduct towards his family, he identified himself as a sovereign who, by virtue of his status as a father, had reason to expect the counter-gift of honor and gratitude. In his autoethnography of migration from Mali, Manthia Diawara describes the prerogative of the elders in his lineage to demand an obligation that could never be exhausted:

There was a Bambara saying that everybody was born with a griot to sing his name. It was the griot who told you about the meaning of your name, the history behind it, and the activities you had to engage in to do more honor to the name. Your family name depended on you to make it known the world over, and you were nothing without a name.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 43–46.

⁹⁶ Agamben, 22.

⁹⁷ Agamben, 9.

⁹⁸ Manthia Diawara, *We Won't Budge: An African Exile in the World* (New York: Civitas Books, 2003), 192.

Likewise, Cheik held himself and his sons to a transcendent ideal of successful migration for which he had already been sacrificed by his family in Mali. His shame stemmed not from his sons' victimization, but from their rejection of the positive values that would have rendered them worthy of sacrifice. Rather than treating the next generation as bearers of their own risks, Cheik enlisted it in the performance of his own outstanding debt to a future self he could not realize.

For Amina, on the other hand, parenthood was a free gift. Derrida wonders "if the same semantic order governs the logic of the gift whether it is under the regime of to have or to be."⁹⁹ Cheik lamented that he gave his sons everything he had, whereas Amina gave "what one does not have," her very being, for which no exchange is possible. Insofar as a mother is a phenomenological "given" for her children, her limits fracture their ground. Both her being-there and not-being-there indicate "the open abyss of donation without covering it over." Is the gift of life a blessing or a curse? Does a child owe thanks or deserve reparations for the burden of survival? Jean-Luc Marion considers the theological dimension of this question: "What does giving mean, what is then being played out by the fact that everything is given, how is one to think the fact that everything that is only is insofar as it is given?"¹⁰⁰ Marion concludes that the transcendental reduction of judgement and the existential reduction of doubt are subsumed by the spiritual moment of surrender to God. In her Muslim faith, Amina would surely agree. Yet it would be transcendental indeed to assume that in the everyday struggle to advocate for her sons, she practiced fidelity to "the pure form of the call."

And what about the young men in question? What is the child to do with the gift that can be neither returned nor forgotten? The negative command "don't forget" contains a hidden

⁹⁹ Derrida, *Given Time*, 48.

¹⁰⁰ Jean-Luc Marion cited in Derrida, 51.

injunction—“don’t remember”—that obedience is not voluntary. What makes life sacred for Agamben is the powerlessness of debt for which *homo sacer* may be “killed but not sacrificed.”¹⁰¹ It is not the law but *homo sacer* that makes the sacrifice in submission to the father, the mother, and the gift. During the self-referential awakening of puberty, some people may negate their own negativity, skipping scales by exchanging submission for agency. In middle school, there is no middle: the circulation of mimetic desire reenacts a genealogy of morals in which someone else becomes sacred and is sacrificed for it.¹⁰² This victim is not Agamben’s *homo sacer* but René Girard’s scapegoat, no mere absence but a representation of threat to the community. The ambivalence of the sacred—Durkheim’s *mana* and Mauss’s *hau*—is not contained in a pure state of being; it animates a story that rationalizes violence as necessary. Although we are all born into debt, some of us accumulate capital, and this is how the trouble begins. According to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s conjectural history of humanity, this replacement of *amour-soi* by *amour-propre* initiates a social order that predicates the equality of citizenship on the repression of envy and resentment.¹⁰³ In this symbolic register, the criminalization of black men and boys may be understood as a ritual sacrifice that enacts security as a metaphysical counter-gift. The certainty of belief in the nature of this struggle is the ideology with which the performance of power justifies itself through a recursive cycle of violence.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 22.

¹⁰² See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

¹⁰³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Discourse on the Origin and the foundations of Inequality Among Men,” in *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Victor Gourevitch, (1755; repr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

¹⁰⁴ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (New York: Norton, 1979). Giorgio Agamben explicitly rejects the mimetic violence of sacrifice as an unacceptable rationalization of bare life. As Rey Chow argues persuasively, holding the sacred to this “double exception” of life that can be killed but not sacrificed falls into the trap of a dualism from which the banished victim cannot escape. Yet Girard’s theory of mimetic

What is an appropriate response to this “schizopathogenic” double bind? Obliquely referencing Gregory Bateson, Derrida describes the potlatch as the psycho-social enactment of the impossibility of the gift.¹⁰⁵ The chain of referents is far from the source: Derrida reads Mauss’s analysis of Boas’s summary of the voluminous material gathered between 1886 and 1930 by George Hunt, his half-Tlingit informant and participant in the Kwakwaka’wakw ritual. Generations of scholars have examined each conjuncture in this relay, with close attention to the discursive politics through which the Hunt-Boaz archive translated from information into evidence, and from history into myth.¹⁰⁶ What to make of ceremonial exchange so competitive that gifts are destroyed in order to assert rank through largesse? As anthropological theory, the potlatch has served as a primordial social fact, an artifact of colonial destruction, the metonym of a lost culture, a metaphor for the present, and a prediction.¹⁰⁷ “Gambling is a form of potlatch, and of the gift system,” wrote Mauss, by which he means that gambling is the modern trace of an elementary form.¹⁰⁸ For Boas, on the other hand, the relation is analogical:

violence presupposes a human nature of struggle to the death, participating in that same double bind. Rey Chow, “Sacrifice, Mimesis, and the Theorizing of Victimhood (A Speculative Essay),” *Representations* 94, no. 1 (2006): 131–49. On the double meaning of sacrifice as gift and “the violent cost of the offer,” see Arjun Appadurai. *The Future as a Cultural Fact* (London: Verso, 2013), 75.

¹⁰⁵ Derrida, *Given Time*, 56. “Like every negative command, like every interdiction that folds back in a contradictory manner toward the subject who utters it (for example, ‘do not listen to me,’ ‘do not read me’), it engenders that schism in the response or the responsibility in which some have sought to recognize the schizopathogenic power of the double bind.” See Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), 206–12.

¹⁰⁶ See, for example, Charles Briggs and Richard Bauman, “‘The Foundation of All Future Researches’: Franz Boas, George Hunt, Native American Texts, and the Construction of Modernity,” *American Quarterly* 51, no. 3 (1999): 479–528; and Margaret Bruchac, “My Sisters Will Not Speak: Boas, Hunt, and the Ethnographic Silencing of First Nations Women,” *Curator* 57, no. 2 (2014), 153–71.

¹⁰⁷ In addition to Mauss, *The Gift*, and Derrida (1992) *Given Time*, see Joseph Masco, “‘It is a Strict Law That Bids Us Dance’: Cosmologies, Colonialism, Death and Ritual Authority in the Kwakwaka’wakw Potlatch, 1849-1922,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37, no. 1 (1995): 41–75; Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption* (London: Routledge, 1979); and Holly High, “Re-reading the Potlatch in a Time of Crisis: Debt and the Distinctions that Matter,” *Social Anthropology* 20, no. 4 (2012): 363–79.

¹⁰⁸ Mauss, *The Gift*, 140 (FN 136).

The contracting of debts, on the one hand, and the paying of debts, on the other, is the potlatch. This economic system is developed to such an extent that the capital possessed by all the individuals associated with the tribe far exceeds the quantity of available valuables that exists; in other words, the conditions are entirely analogous to those prevailing in our own society: if we desired to pay off all our debts, we would find that there was not nearly enough money, in fact, to settle them. The result of an attempt by all creditors to seek reimbursement of their loans [that is, together and immediately] is a disastrous panic that the community takes a long time to recover from.¹⁰⁹

Under the familiar circumstances of extreme hierarchy and systems change, Boas explains, what appears as the irrational squandering of resources operates as a form of “life insurance”—the only rational way to secure a future.

Unlike their parents, Moussa and Modibo came of age as bearers of their own risks. By the time they were in middle school, they had lived in two worlds and knew that their parents had gambled with their future. Perhaps their irrational choices were strategies that their parents did not recognize, suited to playing the game with a loaded deck. In this respect, Modibo’s dangerous friends and Moussa’s gun were forms of network security that insured against the double bind of a law that invokes its opposite. Consider the zone of indistinction created in 1954 by *Brown v Board of Education*, a command that states should end segregation with “all deliberate speed.”¹¹⁰ This gift of time to the opponents of integration authorized another decade of legal discrimination and an indefinite pass on racist practices that shaped the lives of Amina’s sons. If the aggressive, prosecutorial strategy to which they were subjected reflected a juridical state of exception, it also reflected the securitization of Harlem real estate as the last frontier of Manhattan gentrification. African residents were ambivalent about changes in the neighborhood, admiring the fashionable shops and restaurants while comparing soaring rents and unscrupulous

¹⁰⁹ Franz Boas, *Twelfth and Final Report on The North-Western Tribes of Canada* (London: British Association for the Advancement of Science, 1898), 54.

¹¹⁰ *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 294 (1955).

landlords with colonial appropriation. Although 116th Street remained a West African enclave, people were moving to the Bronx, Queens, and New Jersey in search of cheaper housing.

Unfortunately, that strategy had already failed for Cheik. Unable to leave, he couldn't afford to stay. "I should have bought property back in the day," he told his sons. Despite all his gifts, he had nothing to show for his investments.

However, securitization not only measures the price of an asset, but it also creates opportunities that arbitrage disparities and thereby realize value. This is the rationality of the potlatch, which valorizes volatility as a new kind of normal. This is how Amina and Cheik made do, even as they mourned expectations of bright futures for Moussa and Modibo. Facing into her fear for her sons, Amina did whatever seemed best from day to day as knowing practice. She resisted isolation by remaining open to those friends who refused to judge, and by strategizing with the many people—scattered throughout the institutions that had failed her—who consistently gave Moussa and Modibo the benefit of the doubt. Most importantly, she supported other women in her position. Degameze's single mother, for one, had fled the 2002 civil war in Ivory Coast with her three children and was illiterate, undocumented, and could speak no English. Amina helped her apply for financial aid and a basketball scholarship for her wayward son. When Meze and his fourteen-year-old brother were arrested for the bodega robbery, Amina helped them find a good lawyer. She also organized a group of mothers to file charges against a Mouride hustler who had lured a group of boys into a pyramid scheme, forging credit cards to buy gym shoes and marijuana that they sold on the street. She provided interpretation and legal support for an undocumented mother of five whose husband was sent to jail for a fraudulent life insurance claim, a decision that was eventually overturned. In these and many other cases,

Amina committed to a course of action that sought to be truthful without claiming to know the truth.

While these activities often had a political dimension, involving administrators or elected officials, they were usually motivated by pragmatic concerns. Amina was critical of leadership in the United States and Africa, but was not attracted to platforms claiming to have solutions to systemic problems. Though she was proud of HB 5783, the campaign had mattered much more than the law, which wasn't much use to undocumented women. They would keep braiding in their apartments or other people's salons, but at least they had somewhere to go if they had problems—that is, as long as someone was willing to answer their calls. Amina kept getting calls from Chicago, Senegal, and elsewhere, often from people she didn't know. Sometimes she felt taken advantage of and was tempted to let the phone ring. "It's overwhelming," she told me after an elderly woman in her building called for a ride to Costco for the third week in a row. "I told you I would do it tomorrow!" she told the friend of a friend, who was in Burkina Faso and needed some cash to pay for his diabetes medication. "I can't believe I told him I would do this!" she complained while we stood on a corner collecting signatures on a city council petition. But I never heard her say no.

In a finance economy, it is impossible to determine where the debt begins and ends. Events cannot be managed by assigning guilt but by suspending judgment and keeping promises. "The theoretical and supposedly constative dimension of an essay on the gift is *a priori* a piece, only a part, a part and a party," concludes Derrida, "a moment of a performative, prescriptive, and normative operation that gives or takes, indebts itself, gives and takes, refuses to give or accepts to give—or does both at the same time." Describing the gift must side with the gift, he observes, because writing is participation that collapses Hume's Calvinist distinction of the "is"

and the “ought” and “an example of that about which it claims to be speaking.” Of course, this is always a speculative enterprise “because with the gift there is always a ‘but’—the contrary is also necessary: It is necessary to limit the excess of the gift and of generosity, to limit them by economy, profitability, work, exchange.”¹¹¹ We commit the fallacy of faith in the future because that is the only way to manage the events of today. However, once the ground has dissolved under your feet, security in the near future may be a thing of the past.

“Sometimes I lay in bed at night, thinking of all the things I could have done better,” Amina told me once. “But I can’t let that stop me from making more mistakes.” She arrived in New York fully aware of her obligations. She returned her tuition not to clear her account but to acknowledge her permanent debt to her mother. In the years to follow, she would build a house in Dakar for her family, bring her sister and a cousin to the United States, and exchange countless favors pending indefinite future returns. Her presentation for my class was this kind of gift, freely offered but also in the interest of a relationship that was likely to continue. “What does it mean to be successful?” I asked her when our time was up.

She laughed a little, as though the answer should be obvious. “To be able to take care of yourself and your people,” she replied. “It’s all about doing your part.”

¹¹¹ Derrida (1992), *Given Time*, 62–63.

CHAPTER 3

Hard Times in a Rich World:

History in the Future Tense

And how can I invent my version of the story, without my crooked vision? How is it right to slip free of an old skin and walk away from the scene of the crime? We came, we saw, we took away and we left behind, we must be allowed our anguish and our regrets.

—Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*

“I am Lianja, brother of Nsongo. and I have come to your house to ask you to show me the way to trap the sun.” The patriarch said: “What!? What you say is abominable. I have no parents, no father nor mother; I come directly from God. You cannot catch the sun; you will die of fear.”

—*The Epic of Lianja*

When Claude was ten, he was invited to sit with the elders. When his wife Rebecca began to tell this story, Claude walked away to check the meat on the grill. “They gave him an elaborately carved stool,” she said, and then he came back, shaking his head. “No, no. It was not like that. It was just another place at the table. I was just another child in the village. I showed an interest in what they had to teach me. That was the only difference.” He told us that he didn’t exactly volunteer for the obligation and would rather have been playing soccer with his friends. “They observe how you behave. And then they approach you and say, come and sit with us.”

Claude had just returned to the village after two years away at school. “Maybe the elders knew I was homesick. They wanted to show me who I was.” Claude was warming up to the story now, as Rebecca knew he would. “It was a natural thing. They didn’t make a bit deal of it. They just have you watch, and this is how wisdom is acquired. It’s not formal teaching, like in a classroom. You come along and you see how people argue, how they present themselves, how

they take their turn to speak. You learn by watching and by doing, and the knowledge accumulates. Then when your father is no longer there, you will know what to do.”

We were sitting on a blanket in the postage-stamp yard behind their apartment building in Chicago, surrounded by the blank windows of people we did not know. “They recognized your talent,” Rebecca insisted. She had told me about how, visiting the village shortly after the birth of their daughter, she witnessed the overflowing esteem that would be unseemly for him to acknowledge.

Claude continued without affirming or denying her intervention. “At first it’s boring, but after a while you begin to understand that there is value to whatever is going on. You start to pay attention, and then your peers start respecting you. They call you *Losako*.”¹

Among the Bamongo, this was an honorific greeting with which one would request advice from an older person. It would be answered with a proverb, often in the form of a riddle. “What you think is a rope is actually a snake,” he said. “What do you think that means?” He was addressing the two thirteen-year-old girls, joined together by a set of earphones, who were sitting in the grass with us.

“Be careful when you’re walking in the forest?” my daughter ventured, looking up from her phone.

“It’s dangerous to use other people,” I added.

“Things aren’t what they seem,” Rebecca jumped in. “Be careful who you trust.”

“So another kid is going to ask you for advice?” his daughter asked skeptically.

¹ In Nkundó, otherwise known as Lomongo or Lonkundo, the greeting of *Losako* is colloquially translated as “Give me wisdom.” A *losako*—*nsako* in the plural—is a routine honorific that may be applied to women and men, as well as older peers of the same generation. See Gustaf Hulstaert, *Losako, les salutations solennelle des Nkundó* (Bruxelles: Académie royale des Sciences coloniales, 1959).

“I was around your age then. For us, even one minute of seniority made the difference. So if there are twins, the first one born is *Moyo*, and the second is *Moketu*. You give more respect to the one who sees the sunlight first. It doesn’t matter how many years.” He left us to check the grill, and his words had some time to sink in.

“He’s being unduly modest,” Rebecca murmured to me. “That stool was symbolically significant, believe me. He was exposed to serious adult problems on that council. He was called upon to mediate among his peers. It was a burden to take on that role at such a young age.”

Claude returned with a platter full of meat and picked up on her thought. “Along with that respect comes responsibility. Within *inongo*, a *classe d’age*, you don’t want to upset your cohort by acting too proud. We say that pride goes only as far as one can spit. You’ve got to be the kind of person that you would want to listen to yourself, if you know what I mean.”

“I don’t get it,” my daughter said. “Why should it matter if they listen to you or not?”

“Because when you all go out hunting together, you won’t catch a thing unless someone is singing.”

When Claude sang, we listened. He was a skillful storyteller, with the facility at wordplay for which the Congolese are famous.² He was particularly fond of irony, leavening his retelling of tragic events with bits of comedy. “We laugh so we don’t cry,” he told me. “It’s the way you laugh at the corpse of a leopard. You know there’s another one out there laughing at you!” That *losako* was in reference to Mobutu Sese Seko, whose downfall in 1997 after thirty years of dictatorship was followed by twenty more years of civil war. The leopards to follow were Laurent Kabila, a former revolutionary who swept into Kinshasa at the head of a Rwandan army,

² See Rene Devisch, “Frenzy and Renewal in Kinshasa,” *Public Culture* 7 (1995): 623–24.

and his son Joseph Kabila, who took office ten days after his father's 2001 assassination and stayed in power for eighteen years.

"Don't worry, our country's ugly history isn't over yet!" Claude said to me when protests broke out in 2015 over the president's unwillingness to schedule elections.

The former Zaire is one of the world's most distressed and exploited countries. Millions have died in war while billions of dollars in mineral wealth are illegally expropriated—vast reserves of copper and diamonds, as well as rare earth metals such as coltan and cobalt that are critical for the electronics industry.³ These abundant resources have been a lure for exploitation since Belgium's King Leopold established the Congo Free State as a private corporation in 1885. With a private army to enslave, torture, and terrorize workers in his quest to maximize yields of rubber, Leopold was the richest man in the world at the time of his death in 1909, having indirectly murdered an estimated 10 million Congolese.⁴ In 1979, at the height of his prestige in the West, Mobutu boasted that he was the third richest man in the world, presiding over 25 million of the world's poorest people.⁵ Reports indicate that Joseph Kabila continued this legacy, profiting while the death toll in the mineral-rich eastern regions continued to rise.⁶

³ Christopher Mullins and Dawn L. Rothe, "Gold, Diamonds and Blood: International State-corporate Crime in the Democratic Republic of the Congo," *Contemporary Justice Review* 11, no. 2 (2008): 81–99.

⁴ More Congolese people are believed to have died during the twenty-three years of Leopold's rule than the entire population of Belgium, which numbered about 6 billion at the turn of the twentieth century. See Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila: A People's History* (London: Zed Books, 2002), 22; and Adam Hoschild, *King Leopold's Ghost* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998).

⁵ Wendy Cooper, "Zaire's Primrose Path to the Poorhouse," *The Nation*, October 13, 1979. Mobutu's power was very much the product of Cold War foreign policy, and his excesses were generally overlooked by Western observers in the interest of regional stability. For an example of this reasoning, see J. J. Grimond, "From the Chaos of the Congo, Mobutu Has Wrought a Nation," *New York Times*, September 8, 1974.

⁶ The Second Congo War, instigated in 1998 when Laurent Kabila turned against his Rwandan and Ugandan backers, ended officially in July 2003, two years after Kabila's assassination, when his son, having negotiated the withdrawal of Rwandan forces, was sworn in as the head of a transitional government. The violence has continued, however. In 2008, the International Rescue Committee estimated that 5.4 million people had died since 1998 on account of the conflict; by all accounts, the

A student activist in Kinshasa, Claude was forced to leave Africa in 1991, but Africa did not leave Claude. The failure of the national project in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) gave it a concrete existence in Chicago, not only as a dream betrayed but as a daily concern. Claude became an expert in his country's political and economic calamities; bad history inhabited his future like a premonition. "Sometimes it feels like my life is in limbo," he told me. "Like I'm waiting until the time is right to pick up where I left off and do some good for my country."

Claude lived his American life uneasily, poised to sacrifice security for the right opportunity to rebuild a world he had left behind. "How long can he carry on with day-to-day life in America before the pull of life-and-death politics back home becomes too strong?" Journalist Randy Kennedy posed this question about Philippe Wamba, whose father had left his career as a history professor in Boston to lead a rebel faction against Laurent Kabila's unelected government.⁷ Philippe, whose mother was African American, would write a book about a childhood disjointed by his father's exile. "There is much to do and I feel the pull of Africa," he concludes, "the call to throw my shoulder behind the aspirations of the Congolese people."⁸ The protracted political crisis in the DRC casts a long shadow, competing with the everyday

casualties and displacements continue, although attention of international humanitarian agencies has waned. See Claudia Seymour, *The Myth of International Protection: War and Survival in Congo* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019). On Joseph Kabila's personal wealth, see Michael Kavanagh and Dan McCarey, *All the President's Wealth: The Kabila Family Business* (Washington, DC: Pulitzer Center, 2017). Observers suspect that Kabila's defeat in the 2018 elections do not indicate a loss of political or economic influence. See Kimiko de Freytas-Tamura, "Congo President Didn't Run for Re-election, but He's Still in Control," *New York Times*, January 14, 2019.

⁷ Randy Kennedy, "His Father is a Rebel Leader..." *New York Times*, August 29, 1999.

⁸ Philippe Wamba, *Kinship: A Family's Journey in Africa and America* (New York: Dutton, 1999), 350. Philippe was tragically killed in an automobile accident in Kenya, where he was researching a book on the challenges facing young people in Africa.

obligations of another time and place.⁹ At a distance—and even at the eye of the storm—however, it is not clear what should or could be done.

“If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.” These words, attributed to Bishop Desmond Tutu, resonate with anyone sensitive to the abuse of power. It is often followed by a proverbial illustration: “If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality.” The first statement has the force of a categorical imperative applicable to everyone, everywhere and always: when it comes to justice, a side must be taken. Yet the urgency of this message conceals an ambiguity that is explicit in the second statement, a kind of riddle presented from the mouse’s point of view. That the elephant could easily crush the mouse suggests that some action is called for. The mouse certainly thinks so. But what should the bystander do to bring about justice?

Among my informants, the question of justice usually invited some variant of the maxim, “I am who we are.” Under the Zulu name of “ubuntu,” this ethos of collective being became a rallying cry for global justice during the South African struggle against apartheid. Some African philosophers have questioned the truth of a political principle based on unity over difference. The Congolese V. Y. Mudimbe’s genealogy of African thought, for example, traces the “gnosis” of African essence to the fantasies of primordial community that missionaries and anthropologists have brought to their writings since the seventeenth century.¹⁰ Philippe Wamba’s father, Ernest Wamba-dia-Wemba, identified African demands for self-empowerment with the struggle against global capital, which divides and conquers any primordial “we” with the empty

⁹ Clara Han, “The Work of Indebtedness: The Traumatic Present of Late Capitalist Chile,” *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 28 (2004): 169–87.

¹⁰ V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

promises of a parliamentary state.¹¹ South African Nyasha Mboti challenges the assumption that “Africans are harmonic collectivists and sharers, linked together by community-defining conveyor-belts of moral and ethical goodwill ‘gifts.’”¹² These intellectuals resist the depiction of African morality as the antithesis of Western individualism, a dualism that obscures both the reliance of the West on the appropriation of African resources and the self-interested behavior of African leaders. Many of my informants would agree with them, yet they also believed that Africans generally put the needs of others before their own. “Just because you don’t have justice doesn’t mean you can’t be just,” explained Marianne, a friend from Burundi.

The difference between “being” and “having” justice is a practical problem for African migrants in the United States. Memories of knowing practice, social change, and displacement—forced or voluntary—were the experiential ground for adaptation and community-building in the United States. For refugees and asylees, immigration required an accounting of trauma that based new status on an old deficit, the failure of rights at home. For them, having justice meant severing their being from the world they left behind. Undocumented migrants were in a contrary position. Without a legal claim to have justice, they sought to maintain an absent presence by being with others, meeting their obligations without making waves. As for those living in the U.S. with authorization, the circumstances that motivated emigration continued to exert pressure from a distance, not only because of relations abroad but also because of Africa’s relation with the rest of the world. Certain countries were “rising” in journalism and policy discourse. They were generally portrayed, however, as the promising exceptions in a region that remained far behind the rest of the world in terms of human development. Indeed, even the “success stories”

¹¹ Ernest Wamba dia Wemba, “Democracy, Multipartyism and Emancipative Politics in Africa: The Case of Zaire,” *Africa Development* 18, no. 4 (1993): 95–118.

¹² Nyasha Mboti, “May the Real Ubuntu Please Stand Up?” *Journal of Media Ethics* 30 (2015): 127.

of Ghana, Rwanda, and Kenya were sites of political violence during my fieldwork.¹³ In DRC, Côte d'Ivoire, and Mali, civil wars aggravated precarious living conditions, even as financial markets mined this volatility as a resource. Members of the diaspora were afraid to visit their homelands, and refugees who had gained admission to the United States were prevented from sponsoring family members.¹⁴ For my informants from these countries, postcolonial crisis remained the sign of the African as the victim of bad history.

This chapter investigates the ethical problem of everyday life and its accounting for people with unfinished business in another time and place. By ethics, I mean not the moral precepts with which we announce our good intentions, but the intentional act itself, with all its ambiguities of outcome. When things go wrong, a Nkundó speaker will say that “*Dieu est mauvaise*.” What does it mean to say that God is bad? Gustaaf Hulstaert, a Belgian priest, linguist, and botanist who spent sixty-five years among the Bamongo, explained this blasphemy as a complaint by someone who envies the happiness and prosperity of others.¹⁵ Knowing Claude, I offer an alternative interpretation. Perhaps the riddle of such a simple statement is the contradiction of a moral God who permits evil to happen. In such a world, there is no guarantee that moral causes will deliver moral results. The ethical act cannot presume its own morality. Nor can moral law, however rational, guarantee behavior that complies with its categorical imperatives.¹⁶ While some action is necessary to subsist in the present, whether that action is

¹³ Punam Chuhan-Pole and Manka Angwako, *Yes Africa Can: Success from a Dynamic Continent* (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2012). Although French-speaking countries shared in the economic expansion of those years, they were less likely to appear in reports such as this due to relatively more dramatic conflict.

¹⁴ I discuss this policy in Chapter 4.

¹⁵ See Hulstaert, *Losako*, 97.

¹⁶ On the disconnect between law and the everyday dispositions of *habitus*, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline to a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 16–22.

determined as good or evil comes after the fact, based on factors that are largely outside the actor's control. This is why Ludwig Wittgenstein said that ethics cannot be expressed.¹⁷

Performed individually or collectively, social practice generates events in time that are interpreted about time as stories that explain, contextualize, and justify what has happened.

Here I explore the implications of this distinction between ethics and morality for the intertemporal problem of justice. For migrants who conceive of their departure as a rupture of aspirations rather than their realization, the continuity that allows them to plan the near future and interpret the past is interrupted, suspending their intentions in an extended moment of ethical time. Exacerbated by post-recession conditions in the United States, the indeterminacy of this position was expressed by my informants as a state of enhanced awareness and self-reckoning. Some experienced this disorientation as a form of divine knowledge; others redoubled their political commitments. A few re-examined their lives in psychological terms. Whatever their mode of understanding, however, they practiced their knowledge of self and others in two registers. First, they represented the past and the future as an obligation in the present through stories that often conveyed political urgency. Second, they sought to live in the present as a debt to both the past and the future, a moral obligation that was performed, inconsistently, as what Bishop Tutu called *ubuntu*.

¹⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness (London: Routledge, 1961), 86. Strictly speaking, Wittgenstein was converting his ethical position into a moral precept through this assertion. He revisits this problem in the form of puzzle, like a *losako*, in *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. E. Anscombe (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1958), 38–39. See my Introduction, p. 40 (and FN 155).

Making Justice

Claude's village was on a hill overlooking a tributary of the Congo River. "We are surrounded by forest, and the roads are so bad that nobody can get there," he began. For years I had been collecting fragments of a worldview that seemed to overflow the constraints of Claude's Chicago life. But he was my friend, not my research subject, and I was hesitant to ask him for an interview. "You should come with me to Congo," he said often. "Then you'll understand." When I finally began recording our conversations, a narrative emerged from the stream of impressions and commentary with which Claude animated our time together. But as I arranged my labored transcriptions, I must admit that this narrative was as much mine as his. It is written with anxiety and respect for its source. There is affection here, and gratitude for the gift of his trust. But it is probably not the text he would have produced. I have chosen certain quotations from the wealth of his words to suit my purposes, and I have decided to keep his character—my impressions of him—at the center of the story.

Claude had read widely during graduate school and began by describing life in his village as an anthropologist would. When I asked him when he first became aware of the political forces that were shaping his country, he told me, "I would not be the typical, you know, guy who can actually speak for or present that kind of story. I left my parents when I was about nine. I was shipped away to go to school somewhere else." His earliest experiences were of going back and forth between his village and elsewhere; he was always looking in from the outside. It took some time and persistent questioning to get under his skin, as it were. Swimming and fishing in the river, working in the fields with his relations, playing soccer with his friends. These were recollections conveying the feelings associated with places, events, and states of being, bringing added force to the convictions that those feelings warranted. They were simultaneously personal

and collective, clusters of detail and exposition that Pierre Nora called “*lieux de memoire*,” the sites of memory. Nora was interested in the impact on memory of the consciousness of a break with the past, “the sense that memory has been torn—but torn in such a way as to pose the problem of the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists.”¹⁸

It was surely the case that Claude’s stories brought to life a world from which he was involuntarily estranged. Yet he also spoke of that other world in the present tense. Although he had grown and his parents had died, it was available to me should I go to the forest myself one day. His mother was a midwife and healer; his father mediated disputes. His household was flooded with visitors because communal obligations always came first. There was no paid employment. Families grew cassava, manioc, and bananas together. Everyone participated and there was plenty of land for everyone. They rarely had meat but caught fish in the river. “We had what we needed, and that wasn’t much. It’s you in the West who worry about overpopulation. We just worry about not sharing.” This was Claude’s vision of justice. If we could learn to live this way, wanting only what we needed and needing only what was on hand, we would get serious and finally appreciate one another.

Not that this balancing act was easy. Solidarity had to be made, maintained, and recovered. People were always talking about each other, and in repeating what they heard, they preserved shared memories. For instance, Claude remembered hearing about the colonial forced

¹⁸ Pierre Nora, “Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 7. There is a great deal of scholarship on the politics of memory on Africa. See Diawara et al., eds., *Historical Memory in Africa: Dealing with the Past, Reaching for the Future in an Intercultural Context* (Oxford, UK: Berghan Books, 2010); Liisa Malkki, *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology Among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); and Bogumil Jewsiewick and V. Y. Mudimbe, “Africans’ Memories and Contemporary History of Africa,” *History and Theory* 32, no. 4 (1993): 1–11.

labor regime. “‘Everyone takes it on the shoulder,’ they used to say. History is a burden to be carried, like the white man’s baggage.”¹⁹ The metapragmatic frame of reported speech lent these words the gravitas of a plural speaker, what Talal Asad calls an authorizing discourse. Asad asks, “How do authorizing processes represent practices, utterances, or dispositions so that they can be discursively related to general (cosmic) ideas of order?”²⁰ Every time a memory is repeated, it is shaped and reinforced through the act of speech. In this way, Claude both invoked the presence of past speakers and embodied them in a kind of a ritual dialogue with me. Our mutual performance was like a gift exchange, bridging the temporal distance separating a multitude of speakers while also creating space for selective forgetting. I received what he offered without knowing what was omitted or forgotten; he offered without knowing what I would *not* omit or forget in my writing. Collective memory and ethnography are alike in this regard. Speakers and listeners do this “memory work” together, yet each participant has a particular response in this dialectic of recalling and not-recalling, sharing and not-sharing.²¹

A dramatic event can leave its mark in a burst of affect that is disassociated from narrative detail. Describing an interview with Baba Ngoie, an elderly civil servant in Lubumbashi, Johannes Fabian notes how the sites of memory were both marked and evaded through embodied practices of speech. Ngoie blamed his uneven recall on aging, yet Fabian’s transcription reveals how variations in his language enacted a subtle response to the stimulus of

¹⁹ Hulstaert, *Losako*, 207. “*La misère est (une charge de) portage, personne qui ne se la mette sur l’épaule.*” [Misery is the charge of the porter, everyone takes it on the shoulder.] Hulstaert’s commentary: “The misery, the sorrows, the difficulties of life are the common lot of man, no one escapes it. As once for the portage of the whites, everyone had to go there.”

²⁰ Talal Asad, *Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 18.

²¹ Johannes Fabian, “Forgetful Remembering: A Colonial Life in the Congo,” *Africa* 73, no 4 (2003): 489–504.

the past. The upheaval surrounding independence was a *lieux de memoire* that indicated a break without content, a silence that abruptly marked the end of an era. Fabian interprets this as a sign of typification, a technique that brackets concrete experience in order to manage the political danger of the present.²² The suppressed content, however, is expressed obliquely as innuendo or irony. For example, Ngoie refers to Mobutu's presidency as a revolution, yet also compares it to colonization. A similar dynamic can be seen in Fabian's work with artist Tshibumba Kanda Matulu, who entitled one painting "I believe in Mobutu, Almighty Father" while depicting Mobutu's nemesis, Patrice Lumumba, as Jesus on the cross in another. *Mobutisme* demanded not only obedience but devotion.²³

Claude told me that the people in his village associated Mobutu with stability. They had loved Lumumba, their country's first Prime Minister, because he was Tetela, a group classified as Mongo by early ethnologists.²⁴ They blamed the Belgians for his assassination and for the Kwilu rebellion that followed. "I was just a baby then, but they tell me that people were running into the forest and hiding. My younger brother is named after my aunt's son, who was killed by Mulele."²⁵ Old pain is kept current in a name, like the *losako* preserves the burden of portage

²² Fabian, "Forgetful Remembering," 499.

²³ Johannes Fabian, *Remembering the Present: Painting and Popular History in Zaire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

²⁴ This designation was controversial; ethnic classification among ethnologists was as much an expression of European and colonial politics as a scientific enterprise. See Thomas Turner, "'Batetela,' 'Baluba,' 'Basonge': Ethnogenesis in Zaire," *Cahiers d'études africaines* 33, no. 132 (1993): 587–612; William J. Samarin, "Protestant Missions and the History of Lingala," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 16, no. 2 (1986): 138–63; and Johannes Fabian, *Language and Colonial Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

²⁵ Pierre Mulele, a leader of the nationalist *Parti Solidaire Africain* (PSA), served briefly as a cabinet member of the new government until its fracture, leading to deposed Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba's assassination in 1961. In January 1964, he would lead a rebellion to win a "second independence" from the neocolonial forces that had co-opted the national government. Combining Marxist-Leninist and Maoist elements with syncretic magical and religious beliefs, the Kwilu and related Simba rebellion, located in the east of the country, were initially popular among Lumumba's broad base of support. Rebels managed to capture half of the country before falling to U.S.-backed counterinsurgents in the struggle for

when the Belgians appeared out of nowhere. Yet the *Pax Mubutiste* came at a cost that would be Claude's contribution to the story. "There was a lot of propaganda," he told me. "It was national government radio. My awakening came in small doses, by leaving the village for school and then returning again. That's how I learned English, from hearing my American teachers criticize the government."

Claude began his journey into politics when he was eight years old, after two years of literacy training in a village school. "And if you really look at how it was in the Congo," Tshibumba tells Fabian, "sovereign power was not in the hands of the Belgians, it was held for the Catholic religion."²⁶ The Catholic mission was seven miles away. "We had to get up at 4:00 am to get there at 7:30 or the nuns would give us hell." Nevertheless, the long walk is a favorite memory for Claude. "The food was always packed the night before, and it was like we were going on an adventure together. The world was unknown to us then." He did not dwell on the details: who the other kids were, what they talked about, what they saw along the way. He did well in school, which was more curse than blessing at the time, because his family decided to send him to the district capital of Boende, where his oldest sister's husband was a schoolmaster. "I guess they thought the education would be better in the city," he mused. "But it wasn't any different." When his uncle was promoted to a post in the provincial capital, Claude was moved even farther from home. "The rainforest was home to me; the city was a zoo!"

The move was not good for Claude, or for his sister's marriage. "I remember thinking, 'that's not what a family is supposed to be'." He returned to the village before the end of the

the mineral-rich Kasai Province. See Renee C. Fox et al., "'The Second Independence': A Case Study of the Kwilu Rebellion in the Congo," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 8, no. 1 (1965): 78–109; and Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila: A People's History* (London: Zed Books, 2002), 121–39.

²⁶ Fabian, *Remembering the Present*, 27.

term, and it took a full year for his family to raise the funds to cover his school fees at the mission. That was the year he spent “being a child” and attending tribal council meetings with his father. I asked about the stool, having collected some photographs that might have a neumonic effect, but Claude was not interested. “It’s not the chair itself that matters. It’s the fact that you participate and you have a seat at the table.” He downplayed the importance of material culture and did not seem sentimental about objects from his past. There was a single 8 x 10 black-and-white photograph of him as a young man with his mother that had been framed and displayed on the mantelpiece, but he never brought attention to it or to any of the Congolese art that decorated the apartment. The exception was a stack of CDs preserving decades of Congolese music that may or may not be available today. Likewise, his most precious childhood possession had been the transistor radio that he brought back from Boende. “I never left home without it,” he said. “News, Rumba Lingala, it was all music to me!” The other kids were jealous, but he was jealous that they were able to stay in the village.

The only neumonic device besides music that Claude and I took up in our memory work was anthropology itself as objectified in the books that lined our respective walls. Claude, Rebecca, and I shared books related to our conversations, and Africanist ethnographies were a source of particular interest and criticism. Holding a book in his hand, Claude’s elucidations would oscillate between analytical and experiential registers, both historicizing an argument and refuting it empirically. Take the structural-functionalist canard of “ancestor worship.” “Even the missionaries knew we didn’t worship our ancestors!” Claude protested. “When the elders came together, they were thinking with the ancestors, not worshipping them. In the countryside, there is still a degree of inter-dependency, commitment to the common good, respect for the ancestors.

Our ancestors do not let us forget where we're from. We have an obligation to keep them alive by remembering their names and by meeting our obligations to each other.”

In Claude's native language of Nkundó, the same word denotes both living elders and the dead. This suggested to an earlier generation of anthropologists that ancestor cults were an extension of social structures of authority.²⁷ According to the classic literature on African religion, what matters beyond an individual's deeds, burial site, or afterlife is the collective maintenance of order through obedience to a status hierarchy based on relative maturity within an intergenerational chain of relationships that remains unaltered by death.²⁸ In their attention to continuity over time, however, these analyses generally treated variations of social practice as the contaminating noise of modernity. Mongo scholar Wese w'Esimela Lokumo objected in 1976 that the insistence among Western ethnographers on a primitive morality of collective determination led them to underestimate the freedom with which people realize their obligations.²⁹ That they are not locked into a fixed repertoire of kinship roles, he argued, is indicated by standards of hospitality that elevate the stranger, “*l'homme d'autrui*,” as the archetypal object of ethical action.³⁰ Justice is not an abstract ideal; it is performed with respect to an opaque other whose prior relation to the community is ambiguous or nonexistent. A

²⁷ “An elder—any elder—represents to a junior the entire legal and mystical authority of the lineage,” writes Igor Kopytoff. “Everyone is a chief,” the BaSuku say, meaning that every member of a lineage has the power to represent it provided that he or she is the oldest member present. Kopytoff demonstrates that this is also a tendency among speakers of Nkundo, Claude's native language. Igor Kopytoff, “Ancestors as Elders in Africa,” *Africa* 41, no. 2 (1971): 131–35.

²⁸ Also see Meyer Fortes, “Some Reflections on Ancestor Worship,” in *African Systems of Thought*, eds. M. Fortes and G. Dieterlen (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1965); and Wyatt MacGaffey, “African Ideology and Belief: A Survey,” *African Studies Review* 24, nos. 2-3 (1981): 227–74.

²⁹ Wese w'Esimela Lokumo, “La Notion de bont'okaka': indice d'une morale mongo,” *Cahiers des Religions Africaines* 10, no. 20 (1976): 173–202. Also see Joseph Bongango, *Etude des Interdits Chez Les Mongo* (Paris: Publibook, 1970). Paul Riesman makes a related observation when he argues that personal freedom among the Fulani Jelgobe of Niger is exposure to the unpredictability of life. *Freedom in Fulani Social Life: An Introspective Ethnography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

³⁰ Lokumo, “La notion de Bont'okaka,” 202.

functionalist would explain customary rules privileging outsiders as a mechanism for preventing animosity within the potentially volatile context of segmentary social organization.³¹ Yet this practice also pertains to members of a kin group who return to the village after an extended absence. This *habitus*, articulated as *nsako*, reflects a sense of personhood as a contingent web of relations that exceed the bounds of narrative or ritual control: we both know and do not know the other as we cannot fully know ourselves.³²

If identification with the elder-ancestors implied a cyclical temporality, a person was also expected to acquire power and responsibility over the course of a life. In the years since Lukomo's intervention, ethnographers of postcolonial Africa have described how the accumulation of "wealth in people," the criteria for a successful career, requires skill in managing the dialectic between ascriptive obligations and personal opportunity.³³ The term "dividual," first coined by McKim Marriott to describe caste-based personhood in India, is a term that corrects for the unmarked category of the bounded individual subject as a universal form.³⁴ However, elevating a presupposition into a dualism only converts it into a concrete abstraction, which circulates discursively as a meaningful sign. The conceptual uptake of "dividuality" in

³¹ For a recent overview of hospitality in anthropology, see Michel Agier, *The Stranger as My Guest*, trans. H. Morrison (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2021).

³² See Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory*, 20. For Bourdieu, "sayings, proverbs, gnomic poems, spontaneous 'theories'" are "semi-learned grammars of practice" with ambiguous status as knowledge, without the ease of the *habitus* or the prescriptive rigidity of law. His emphasis on their instability vis a vis the unconscious "generative schema," on one hand, and self-conscious norms, on the other, reflects the dualism of his approach.

³³ Some classic studies include Bryan Wilson, ed., *Rationality* (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1970); Paul Riesman, "The Person and the Life Cycle in African Social Life and Thought," *African Studies Review* 29, no. 2 (1986): 112; John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, "Goodly Beasts, Beastly Goods: Cattle and Commodities in a South African Context," in *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992), 127–54; James Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Jane I. Guyer and S.M. Eno Belinga, "Wealth in People as Wealth in Knowledge: Accumulation and Composition in Equatorial Africa," *Journal of African History* 36 (1995).

³⁴ McKim Marriott, "Interpreting Indian Society: A Monistic Alternative to Dumont's Dualism," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 36, no. 1 (1976): 189–95.

recent years has had a real impact on how social theorists think about the relation of self to society.³⁵ Yet it is ambiguity between these opposites, not their categorical accuracy, that appears as an obstacle and a resource in the practice of everyday life. This is why the longer I knew Claude, the more compelling I found Rebecca's depiction of her husband on his stool with the elders as a child who took on too much too early. That Claude was both compliant with these expectations and ambivalent about their demands probably did mark him as a leader from the start. What does it mean to start at the beginning of a story, when memory always starts from an endpoint that changes with every encounter? From the spatiotemporal distance of our conversations in Chicago, his "life history" was an expression of collective memory and also acutely, at times bitterly, his own.

Between the rainforest and the zoo, Claude received a double education in learning by saying, according to the elders, and learning by reading, according to the principles of modernization. He was never interested in church, he told me, because he had learned at an early age that religion, politics, and identity were forms of misrecognition as well as connection. Catholic missionaries arrived even before the Belgian soldiers, and the Protestants were not far behind. "When they went around *Basankusu*—on my river—saying 'what is this place?' a person said 'I am alone. I am myself.' *E mi mongo*: myself. And they wrote down: *Mongo. These people are Mongo*. And that's political, because the basic strategy in any campaign is to define the opponent before they have a chance to define themselves." Claude's parents belonged to a local

³⁵ Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," *October* 59 (Winter 1992), 3–7; Katrien Pype, "Confession cum Deliverance: In/Dividuality of the Subject Among Kinshasa's Born-Again Christians," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 41, no. 3 (2011): 280–310; Godfrey Siu et al., "Dividuality, Masculine Respectability and Reputation: How Masculinity Affects Men's Uptake of HIV Treatment in Rural Eastern Uganda," *Social Science and Medicine* 89 (2013): 45–52; Arjun Appadurai, *Banking on Words: The Failure of Language in the Age of Derivative Finance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

church that had been established by a group of Swedish evangelicals; later in life they were drawn to Kimbanguism, a Congolese charismatic movement with roots in the Baptist church.³⁶ This switch suggests that they were not naïve about the changes taking place around them, as does their investment in their son's modern education. Wary of Catholicism's neocolonial entanglements, they refused to send Claude to a seminary high school even though they had no money and it would have been tuition-free. "The priests wanted to catch you before you lost your loyalty," he explained, "before you started thinking for yourself. Fortunately, my parents were Protestants and didn't want a priest in the family."

The absences in Claude's story of his school years indicate that he was only too aware of the sacrifices that were being made to support his future. "I never wanted to leave, but I also couldn't stay. I only became aware of my community by stepping away and seeing it from afar." He was both an emissary, representing a way of life, and an investment that might yield dividends or provide insurance. He took this mission seriously. Did he express any reluctance? Rebecca, who had introduced me to Hulstaert's compilation of *nsako*, told me that he probably didn't have to. Bamongo thought encourages an inherent skepticism that tolerates ambivalence. Many *nsako* address the temptation to disregard the wisdom of the elders by seeking a better life elsewhere. "There may be anger here," a *losako* concedes, "but what is over there?" "The little fish have left the tributaries and swum into the river" where they are likely to be eaten by much bigger fish. "He throws his walking stick at the sun" when, like the hero of the Lianja epic, overweening ambition leads to a foolhardy death. "Flight will kill you" is also "theft will kill

³⁶ Kimbanguism was founded in 1921 by Bakongo Prophet Simon Kimbangu, who claimed to be an incarnation of the holy spirit. Headquartered in Nkamba, the church estimates 22.5 million believers worldwide. See Aurélien Mokoko Gambpiot, *Kimbanguism: An African Understanding of the Bible* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2017).

you,” a *double-entendre* implying, perhaps, that emigration robs a community of its children and children of the community.

It is ambiguity that makes a *losako*. “On the subject of morals,” Lokumo notes, “proverbs are not explicit. Their lesson often depends on the interpreter and also the context in which it is used. We cannot really reproduce them in their brute form without taking into account their actual use.”³⁷ Or as Rebecca put it, reading *nsako* was like reducing songs to their lyrics. Spoken in a particular situation, on the other hand, a “solemn salutation” references an infinite number of other situations in the past and the future, raising possibilities for understanding that are likely to escape the maturity and wisdom of the recipient. In semiotic terms, one could say that its performance activates the incommensurability between the particular token and the general type, which is what all tokens have in common.³⁸ *Nsako* index the indeterminacy of signification itself, like the *mise en abyme* of facing mirrors or Gertrude Stein’s insight that the rose that is a rose is both the same and different, because no two signs are exactly same.³⁹ Of course, the chain of signifiers need not be identical; the rose may remind you of a lily, which reminds you of an orchid, which reminds you of your mother. While the first rose may represent the flower outside your window, the subsequent associations merely reiterate the sign of the first. In this way, a *losako* initiates a direct (re)sonance or (re)semblance among signs that repeat endlessly, without representing an object at all.

³⁷ Translation mine. Wese w’Esimela Lokumo, “La notion de Bont’okaka. Indice d’une morale mongo,” *Cahiers des Religions Africaines* 10, no. 20 (1976): 189.

³⁸ Michael Silverstein, “Axes of Evals: Token versus Type Interdiscursivity,” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 15, no. 1 (2005): 5–22.

³⁹ On this point, see Jacques Derrida on “iteration,” in *Limited, Inc.*, trans. S. Weber and J. Mehlman, (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 62.

Walter Benjamin called this metaphoric association of signs the “mimetic faculty,” a cognitive capacity for imitation that does not require conceptualization. Mimesis is the contingent play of family resemblances, “a nonsensuous similarity not only between what is said and what is meant but also between what is written and what is meant, and equally between the spoken and the written.”⁴⁰ This aptitude “to read what was never written” appears “like a flash” of insight, or a fractal pattern that crystalizes before your eyes. It is the magical correspondence that the creative mind sees in nature: the five fingers of the hand, five arms of the starfish, five lobes of a sycamore leaf.⁴¹

What is confusing about mimesis is that in describing its recursive movement, I have reified it as a reflexive concept. This is how Erich Auerbach treats mimesis: as a “representation of reality.” His approach is not metaphoric but metonymic, anchoring the general sign to a particular object in the world. Auerbach’s notion of figural representation understands an event, such as Lumumba’s assassination or Claude’s emigration, as both the fulfillment of a series of previous events and as a prefiguration of the future.⁴² Thus, the metaphorical dimension appears as a chain of deferral, positing the present as living history that is always unfolding. The metonymic function preserves meaning by filtering through these signs retrospectively from the

⁴⁰ Walter Benjamin, “On the Mimetic Faculty,” *Selected Writings, Vol. 2, Part 2*, ed. M.W. Jennings et al. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999), 722. “Doctrine of the Similar” is an earlier and more extensive version of this fragment published in the same collection (694–98). On family resemblances, see Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 32.

⁴¹ Gregory Bateson makes a similar point with his immanent ecology of mind. “Is there a profound analogy between grammar and anatomy? Is there an interdisciplinary science which should concern itself with such analogies?” Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), 153–54.

⁴² See Edward Said, “Introduction to the Fiftieth Anniversary Edition,” in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality*, ed. Erich Auerbach, Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003); Erich Auerbach, “Figura,” in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); and Hayden White, “Auerbach’s Literary History: Figural Causation and Modernist Historicism,” in *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 87–100.

transcendental position of the present. In this respect, narrative is a kind of institution, maintaining the boundary between inside and outside by staging subjects acting on objects. Benjamin wanted to bring attention to the permeability of that boundary that makes representation possible in the first place. Insofar as any truth statement relies on language, it both enacts its own reality and points beyond itself. The difficulty keeping these dimensions apart or thinking of them together is the “play-space” of politics: the possibility that Lumumba’s assassination could be forgotten or that Claude’s emigration could be another mission rather than exile.

As an itinerant student, Claude learned to associate the institutions that shaped his life with their political investments. The Catholic Church sustained the European commitments of colonialism; the Protestants encouraged an ethos of self-help that changed with the times; and the nationalist state imposed its own religion of *Mobutisme*, replete with baptismal naming, ritual arts, and single national party. “I still remember when they told me that at *conception* you were a member of the MPR (*Movement Populaire de la Revolution*)!” This was a provision in the Constitution of 1974, passed by a puppet parliament right around the time Claude entered a *lycée* in Boende. Like most of the schools in the country, it was a Catholic mission in the process of nationalization. The president cultivated popular support by embodying spiritual authority as the father of a unified lineage.⁴³ His campaign of *authenticité* mirrored Senegalese president Sedar Senghor’s notion of *négritude*, a literary movement that sought an antidote for the alienation of racism in the substance of African civilization. However, the conversion of cultural forms into

⁴³ Michael G. Schatzberg, *Political Legitimacy in Middle Africa: Father, Family, Food*. (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2001).

political currency was a colonial strategy that he adopted with cunning under the mantle of “Zairianization.”⁴⁴

Mobutu adapted Belgian institutions to serve a postcolonial regime that institutionalized predation and spread terror as a perversion of public desire. Channeling nearly a century of resentment towards Europeans into autochthonous pride, Mobutu “politics of the belly” fed the people of Zaire a spectacular new tradition of Africanized modernity.⁴⁵ Like Catholicism, Mobutu’s state made a claim to the loyalty of the people as a counter-gift for the privilege of birth, a debt that could never be paid. Like the leaders of charismatic Protestant movements that were sweeping the country, Mobutu claimed to possess the vision of a prophet, seeking veneration through the magic of media, sorcery, and political techniques of terror and awe that tightened his grip on the lives and minds of his subjects. One by one, the institutions sustaining civil society fell apart. At Claude’s high school, only students with family in town or plenty of dollars on hand could count on a daily meal. An aunt moved into town and other relatives chipped in to help, but his prospects were uncertain until his American science teacher took an interest in his education. That teacher - we’ll call him Jim – invited Claude to live with him and a group of other Peace Corps volunteers, where he soon became fluent in English as he taught

⁴⁴ “In the name of authenticity, the Government has (1) ordered all Zairians to replace European with authentic names, those which refer to their ancestors (thus Joseph Desire Mobutu became Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu Wa Za Banga); (2) changed the name of the country, cities, and streets to eliminate European names; (3) taken down old statues and commemorative plaques of foreigners like Stanley, Leopold II, and Elizabeth; (4) changed the fashion code to make African dresses and abacosts the formal wear, and to eliminate the wearing of coats and ties for men and mini-skirts, trouser suits, wigs, lipstick, and make-up for women; (5) greeted foreign heads of state with drumming rather than a 21-gun salute; and (6) urged that all traditional art be returned to Zaire so as to inspire contemporary artists.” Kenneth Lee Adelman, “The Recourse to Authenticity and Negritude in Zaire,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 13, no. 1 (1975): 134–39.

⁴⁵ Jean-François Bayart, *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly* (London: Longman, 1993). “It is clear that the obscenity of power in the postcolony is also fed by a desire for majesty on the part of the people.” Achille Mbembe, “The Banality of Power and the Aesthetics of Vulgarity in the Postcolony,” *Public Culture* 4, no. 2 (1992): 28.

Lomongo to his hosts. When Jim was promoted to the regional office of the Peace Corps, he enrolled Claude in a Mbandaka school run by an American Protestant denomination, the Disciples of Christ.

The theatre for the next stage of Claude's education was the postcolonial battle over Congolese hearts and minds. By the time he was a high school senior, Claude was paying his own way by teaching Lingala to volunteers with Habitat for Humanity, an American evangelical organization that promoted personal accountability through homeownership.⁴⁶ He noticed that the government preferred Americans to Europeans, and the Catholics—who were mostly Europeans—didn't seem to be in charge anymore. As he became fluent in English, he also began to detect an ideological split among the Americans between evangelicals, who had money, and the Peace Corps, who had opinions. "This is the time where I started pondering a little more about what these guys don't like about the system," Claude told me. "The Americans were always so sure they were right. But I also noticed that they didn't always know what they were talking about." Once, when a government official visited the regional city, Jim was pulled out of the welcoming delegation because he was inappropriately dressed. "He was wearing a shirt from *le minoterie de Matadi*, a factory for producing wheat flour. People would wash the cotton sacks and make shirts. So Jim went to greet the minister with that kind of shirt and started lecturing

⁴⁶ Habitat for Humanity established its first international pilot program in Mbandaka in 1973, promoting interest-free loans as authorized by Exodus 22:25: "If you lend money to any of my people with you who is poor, you shall not be like a moneylender to him, and you shall not exact interest from him." According to Clarence Jordan, one of Habitat's founders: "What the poor need is not charity but capital, not caseworkers but co-workers. And what the rich need is a wise, honorable and just way of divesting themselves of their overabundance. The Fund for Humanity will meet both of these needs. Money for the fund will come from shared gifts by those who feel they have more than they need and from non-interest-bearing loans from those who cannot afford to make a gift but who do want to provide working capital for the disinherited.... The fund will give away no money. It is not a handout." See <https://www.habitat.org/ap/about/how-we-began>. This style of evangelical humanitarianism was criticized by many observers as a debt-trap promoting an ideology of "self-reliance" over an indigenous ethos of interdependence.

him about how things should change. But would he have greeted his own senator that way? You just don't do that!"⁴⁷ Claude regarded Jim's disregard for protocol as a diplomatic blunder, whatever its intended message, not because he was loyal to Mobutu, but because he felt that the institution of the Presidency deserved greater respect.

Having encountered Catholics and Protestants, American modernizers and Zairean *authenticité*, Claude was developing his own opinions about self-definition. He had figured out that the Congolese state had already been betrayed, before he was even born. "The African troops in the Congo have suffered a historical moral defeat," wrote Frantz Fanon upon hearing of Lumumba's assassination. "With arms at the ready, they watched without reacting (because they were UN troops) the disintegration of a State and a nation that all Africa had saluted and sung. A shame."⁴⁸ The circumstances surrounding "the Congo crisis" were repressed during the Mobutu years, but theories circulated and suspicions operated across the political spectrum.⁴⁹ Only later would it become clear that self-government had been sacrificed by other African leaders in a

⁴⁷ Jim's choice of dress may have been intended to offend Mobutu's official. Zaire invited the American corporation Continental Grains to open the *Minoterie de Matadi* (MIDEMA) in 1972 as a "mixed enterprise" with 72 percent financing from commercial banks. Midema would become the largest food producer in the country, distributing American wheat and providing reliable returns for foreign investors even as Zaire's economy collapsed in 1974–75. The DRC has been relying on food imports ever since. See Kankonde Mukadi and Eric Tollens, *Sécurité Alimentaire au Congo-Kinshasa: Production, Consommation et Survie* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2001). On dividends to U.S. investors in MIDEMA, see Mark Kantor et al., "Continental Milling Corp (Zaire: 1980 (1) and (2))," in *Reports of Overseas Private Investment Corporation Determinations* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1980). 606–26.

⁴⁸ Frantz Fanon, "Lumumba's Death: Could We Do Otherwise?" in *Toward the African Revolution: Political Essays*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 196.

⁴⁹ In 1982, Madeleine Kalb's *The Congo Cables* revealed the extent of U.S. involvement in Lumumba's assassination, the installation of Mobutu, and related proxy wars. Many exposés followed; an official investigation in Belgium led to an official apology in 2001. See Madeleine G. Kalb, *The Congo Cables* (New York: MacMillan, 1982); David N. Gibbs, "Misrepresenting the Congo Crisis," *African Affairs* 95, no. 380 (1996): 453–59; and Meike J. De Goede, "Mundele, It Is Because of You': History, Identity and the Meaning of Democracy in the Congo," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 53, no. 4 (2015): 583–609.

cynical Cold War compromise that furthered Euro-American interests.⁵⁰ Even as a teenager, however, Claude was sensitive to the irony that he was being introduced to the tragedy of his own national legacy by Americans for whom Congo was a *cause célèbre*.

Equipped with Mongo skepticism, a modern education, and a facility with languages, Claude became indispensable to his American mentors. “Almost the same but not white,” writes Homi Bhabha, “the visibility of mimicry is always produced at the site of interdiction.”⁵¹ Bhabha distinguishes mimicry from mimesis in order to emphasize the difference in repetition, the counter-performativity of an imitation that is not identical to an original.⁵² Of course, this is true of all imitation: the word “likeness” is a contronym, a word that is also its opposite and thus cannot mean exactly what it says. “Like” expresses both semblance—identifying similarity—and desire—differentiating what a person likes and does not like. “Interdiction” is also a contronym, meaning prohibition, cutting, and interception, appropriating a flow. By splitting mimesis in two, Bhabha locates each moment in the double operation of the word with respect to an asymmetry of power. Mimicry takes advantage of the ambiguity in repetition to disrupt “authorizing discourse,” whereas mimesis reclaims authority by denying the difference within it. It was through this oscillation of appearance and concealment that colonial authorities directed the desires of the *evolué*. Displacing the racial basis of this formula did not subvert its logic: Mobutu was even more effective at demonstrating how a certain kind of performance might mask the impossibility of authenticity.

⁵⁰ See Stephanie Matti (2010), “Resources and Rent Seeking in the Democratic Republic of the Congo,” *Third World Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (2010): 401–13.

⁵¹ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 128.

⁵² Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, ed. MW. Jennings et al., trans. E. Jephcott et al., (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 48.

However, it would be a mistake to assume that the only authorities in Claude's life were the institutions of church and the state. While *Mobutisme* was a true conspiracy, the counter-discourses that Claude encountered on his journey to adulthood were effective only insofar as they made mimetic connections that appealed to their participants. This was as true of the village elders as it was of the leftist Peace Corps workers. Any solidarity performs an ideology that generates mimicry, a counter-performativity that may rise to consciousness as resistance or linger as the incipient threat of disorder. How things work is also how they break. Only from a transcendental position can a storyteller trust the solid ground that leads to justice. This is the weakness of the true believer, an awareness that was the key to the effectiveness of Claude's knowing practice. Claude's ambivalence served him well as he mediated worlds within worlds, expanding his repertoire of skills without giving himself away. He arbitrated institutional boundaries, identifying opportunities by creating connections across the fractured ground of Mobutu's Zaire. This was a kind of dance, mimetic in its gestural embodiment of the play in imitation. "Don't assume someone is clumsy at the dance, just because they don't have much," advises one *losako*. "It is the parrot who dances at night," says another.⁵³

But mimicry is a risky game. Claude was already a success story when he entered university in Kinshasa. With a secure income, multi-lingual fluency, and inter-sectoral connections, Claude embodied the recognizable other for both the neocolonial modernizers and the agents of the postcolonial state. He was also finally in a position to pay the school fees for his younger siblings, returning the gift of community investment. However, in his youth and ambition he had stumbled onto dangerous ground. Claude had come to believe in himself. Fabian's dear friend Tshibumba, whose pictorial *History of Zaire* was a masterpiece of parodic

⁵³ Hulstaert, *Losako*, 114, 431.

commemoration, disappeared in 1981, never to be seen again. A decade later, Mobutu had lost all patience with the challenge that is intrinsic to the play of imitation: authority's incapacity to fully realize its concept.⁵⁴ His mounting paranoia focused on the generation being shaped as the future of Zaire. Claude found that he could no longer trust his instincts. He was "dying from the dance," as one *losako* goes, mortally aware that he could not control the outcome of his actions. His skills of postcolonial mimesis were failing him the way effects inevitably diverge from ethical intentions, which may be muddier than they feel. Claude fled the dance of death at the end of the academic year in 1991, only a few months before Mobutu declared war on the students of his new nation.

Humanitarian Grace

Like a father that devours his young, Mobutu destroyed the actuality of Zaire. Yet it persisted in the lives of its exiles as a possibility yet to be realized. Claude's political commitment only grew after returning with Rebecca to the new Congo in 1997, shortly after Laurent-Désiré Kabila marched into Kinshasa and ousted Mobutu. Damaged from rioting, deteriorating infrastructure, and population displacement, the capital city was unrecognizable. Article 15—an improvisational ethos of small trade, foraging, and petty theft—was the law of

⁵⁴ "The ambivalence of colonial authority repeatedly turns from mimicry—a difference that is almost nothing but not quite—to menace—a difference that is almost total but not quite. And in that other scene of colonial power, where history turns to farce and presence to 'a part' can be seen the twin figures of narcissism and paranoia that repeat furiously, uncontrollably." Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 91. Nzongola-Ntalaja describes the Mobutu regime as a neocolonial autocracy: "The uninterrupted exploitation of the country's resources by the metropolitan bourgeoisie, but this time in collaboration with national ruling classes. The primary mission of the latter is to maintain the order, stability and labour discipline required for meeting the country's obligations to the international market." Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo*, 126. Also see Ernest Wamba dia Wamba, "Issues and Agendas: Some Remarks on Culture, Development and Revolution in Africa," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 4, no. 3 (1991): 220, 231.

the street. A “Kinshasa miracle” of survival that involved sharing within ever-widening networks also created new opportunities for abuse and exploitation within a social order that had lost its normative moorings.⁵⁵ Though everyone was struggling, misfortune was construed as evidence of evil, and political disagreements devolved into witchcraft accusations.⁵⁶ Charismatic sects promised protection and prosperity to believers willing to reconfigure scattered selves into a renewed spiritual whole.⁵⁷ In the turmoil of a civil war, Claude was forced to flee yet again, this time with his wife and small child.

It is reasonable to suppose that this common injury would have united Congolese abroad. But attempts at diaspora activism in Chicago were frustrating. “We couldn’t agree on a mission,” Claude told me. “Some of us wanted a platform for advocacy in Washington, to stop the rape of our country. Others wanted to focus on the social welfare of the people who are here. But really, whenever we tried to organize something or raise some money, it became clear that what everyone wanted was a social club. All they wanted to do was dance.” Music was a language of nostalgia that imitated the sense of being together. Yet the mimetic desire that circulated during these events also formed patterns that included some by excluding others.⁵⁸ Claude soon found

⁵⁵ See Theodor Trefon ed., *Reinventing Order in the Congo: How People Respond to State Failure in Kinshasa* (London: Zed Books, 2013); and Janet MacGaffey, *The Real Economy of Zaire* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991).

⁵⁶ Filip De Boeck, “The Apocalyptic Interlude: Revealing Death in Kinshasa,” *African Studies Review* 48, no. 2 (2005): 11–32.; Julien Bonhomme, “The Dangers of Anonymity: Witchcraft, Rumor, and Modernity in Africa,” *HAU* 2, no. 2 (2012): 205–33; Andrew Apter, “Matrilineal Motives: Kinship, Witchcraft, and Repatriation among Congolese Refugees,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 18 (2012): 22–44.

⁵⁷ See Katrien Pype, *Confession cum Deliverance*. Pype describes parallels in the public confession of born-again Christians with ritual healing through spirit possession among the Bamongo and Yaka. Ellen Corin, “Refiguring the Person: The Dynamics of Affects and Symbols in an African Spirit Possession Cult,” in *Bodies and Persons: Comparative Perspectives from Africa and Melanesia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 80–102; Devisch, “Frenzy and Renewal,” 623–27.

⁵⁸ There are echoes of Girardian sacrifice throughout Claude’s story: from childhood, his talents drew both praise and exile from communities seeking immunity from mimetic violence. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (New York: Norton, 1979). Nidesh Lawtoo challenges Girard’s primordialism by

that his origins in Mobutu's province tainted his relations with other Congolese. At first he tried to correct misconceptions. "The first insurgents came from Equateur," he told me. "Mobutu didn't do anything for *any of us* outside his own hometown. But people believe what they want to believe. They take one look at you and they forget that you are a stranger."

Sometimes people forget for a reason. When diaspora "works," norms fracture and reconstitute among new relations by extending the past into the present and extending gifts that are never settled, thereby keeping the future at hand.⁵⁹ But their collective memory had the texture of burlap, underwritten not only by the negotiation of agreements but also by what they kept to themselves or chose to forget. As I reviewed my transcripts, I realized how much "music" was lost to my limitations with language. Fabian noticed in his interview with Baba Ngoie how code-shifting between French and Swahili inflected the content of their memory work. "If a certain linguistic medium (a language, but it could also be just register or way of speaking) predisposes you to leave unsaid what you would tell in another, then the question ... —'does remembering (and forgetting) speak a language?'—makes sense."⁶⁰ I did not possess Fabian's linguistic dexterity. Claude's English was better than my French, so we stayed in a language *four* steps removed from the idiom of his childhood. Though Rebecca, who knew Nkundó and

showing, in a comparative analysis of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, how the violence of postcolonial mimesis expresses colonial rupture. Nidesh Lawtoo, "A Picture of Africa: Frenzy, Counternarrative, Mimesis," *Modern Fiction Studies* 59, no. 1 (2013): 26–52. Also see Roberto Esposito, *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life*, trans. Z. Hanafi (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2011), 9–45; Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. L. Schehr (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1982), 80; and Arjun Appadurai, *The Future as a Cultural Fact* (London: Verso, 2013), 86–99.

⁵⁹ This ongoing sense of displacement may partially account for the critical role that diasporas have historically played in both financing and mediating conflicts in their countries of origin. See Robin Cohen, "Diaspora and the Nation-State: From Victims to Challengers," *International Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1996): 507–20; Dan Lainer-Vos, "Manufacturing National Attachments: Gift-giving, Market Exchange and the Construction of Irish and Zionist Diaspora Bonds," *Theory and Society* 41 (2012): 73–106; and Bahar Baser and Ashok Swain, "Diasporas as Peacemakers: Third Party Mediation in Homeland Conflicts," *International Journal on World Peace* 25, no. 3 (2008): 7–28.

⁶⁰ Fabian, "Forgetful Remembering," 494.

Lingala as well as French, provided illuminating commentary on the interlingual subtleties of certain remarks, Claude's narration was clearly shaped for my consumption. That this problem impoverished my ethnography is one of its defining features. I encountered at least a dozen different languages over the course of my fieldwork and had difficulty picking up words and phrases of even Wolof and Lingala, the two I encountered the most frequently. Yet this was not merely a methodological limitation; it was an aspect of the social field that African migrants produced through their activities as a diaspora.⁶¹

If cultural forms emerge from the collective work of being together, they become empty without the trust that makes that work possible. Networks can be hard to sustain among people who are too different to be kin but too alike to be strangers. Under these circumstances, some will disavow any debt to the future by accepting a good-enough present, banishing scapegoats from their idea of order and calling it ethics.⁶² This is the compromise of liberal humanitarianism, founded on the cosmopolitan ideal of Kant's categorical imperative, an agenda that thinks it knows what it wants. This was not a form of justice that Claude recognized, however. His politics—and ethics—inhabited the gap between moral responsibility and moral intelligibility, acting with uncertainty and adapting to the outcomes just as he had learned to make do in Congo. As Robert Meister notes, “Unconscious wishes are not directly moral in the Kantian sense that we avow responsibility for them as our own, but they are indirectly moral in the sense of being motivationally intelligible as the affect felt by others—and especially toward

⁶¹ On the ambiguities of linguistic and cultural difference, see Susan Gal and Judith T. Irvine, “The Boundaries of Languages and Disciplines: How Ideologies Construct Difference,” *Social Research* 62, no. 4 (1995): 967–1001.

⁶² Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *The Mark of the Sacred*, trans. M.B. DeBevoise (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013).

ourselves.”⁶³ This is why, as the years passed, Claude increasingly expressed his politics as ethical commitments—often sporadic, volatile, and emotionally charged—with Bamongo who, like him, could not easily condemn the sins of others without raising the specter of their own complicities.

Doubting his impact, Claude’s hospitality extended a vital bridge for newcomers still reeling from the shock of arrival. Sylvie, who grew up in a Mongo village upriver from Claude’s, had been living in Chicago for a little over a year when we met at Claude and Rebecca’s apartment in 2012. They had been watching the television show *ER*, which was the subject of a running commentary in Lomongo and Lingala that shifted into French for my benefit.

“That doesn’t look anything like the Cook County emergency room!” Sylvie remarked. “They don’t show you the room where you’ve got to wait six hours to see a doctor.” Her leg was propped on a chair before her, her knee too swollen to bend.

“You have to get that operation,” Claude chastised, handing her a ziplock bag full of ice with one hand and a glass of merlot with the other.

“I’ve just been working too much,” she said lightly, as though a few days off her feet would resolve the problem. “Besides, I can’t afford to take that much time off.” Sylvie worked as an aide at a nursing home from 6:30 in the morning to 2:30, then cleaned offices downtown from 4:30 to 11:30 at night. “When I get a better job. Then I’ll do it. Meanwhile, God will take care of me. I study my English on Saturday. I go to church on Sunday. He takes care of the rest.”

Claude burst out laughing, and she did too. Sometimes it was hard to tell when they were being serious. “Besides, what will my family do if I get anesthesia and never wake up? This way they can’t have me, but at least they can have a computer and a new TV!”

⁶³ Robert Meister, *After Evil* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 315.

Sylvie had not seen her family since 2000, when she moved to the capital from her convent in Basankusu. For years she had asked her superiors for permission to attend the university in Kinshasa. Finally, they relented and granted her a three-year sabbatical. She moved into an apartment with three other nuns, and it was good for a while. “One did economics, one did English, one did history, and I did medicine. It was so nice for all of us to live together while we pursued our studies. We were like a family, helping each other. I was nice to everybody!”

But like most families, there were underlying tensions. Sylvie’s village was not far from Gbadolite, Mobutu’s hometown and the headquarters of Jean-Pierre Bemba’s Movement for the Liberation of the Congo (MLC). “I was never political,” Sylvie insists. “But they didn’t trust me.”

“Well, I was political and they didn’t trust me either,” replied Claude. “No one trusts anyone in Congo, especially us *Bangala*, because we say it like it is.”⁶⁴

“The second Kabila seemed better at first . . .,” ventured Sylvie.

Claude grimaced. “Kabila *pere* was handpicked by Museveni and presented to Kagame in order to camouflage Kagame’s invasion of Congo.⁶⁵ When he didn’t follow orders, they had him assassinated and put his son in power. That kind of happens in monarchies, not democracies.”

⁶⁴ *Bangala* is a Lingala term for persons from Equateur Province.

⁶⁵ A rebel leader opposing the Amin and Obote dictatorships, Yoweri Kaguta Museveni became president of Uganda in 1986. He has been popular in international circles for promoting public health initiatives, cooperating with structural adjustment programs, and otherwise encouraging foreign private investment in his country. Paul Kagame grew up as a Tutsi exile in Uganda, where he fought in Museveni’s rebel army and rose in the ranks to serve as vice president and minister of defense in 1994. Following the Rwanda genocide, he returned to his country to assume the presidency in 2000. Both presidents have been criticized by human rights groups for repressing free speech and indefinitely extending their terms, as well as orchestrating military interventions and exploiting mineral wealth in the neighboring Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Many followers of politics in the region consider them responsible for the installation of Laurent-Désiré Kabila as president in 1997, as well as his assassination and immediate replacement by Joseph Kabila in 2001.

Sylvie shrugged her shoulders, and her smile seemed strained. “My faith was with the church, not politics. I didn’t know anything about politics. I was worried about my family. I was applying for a scholarship for my sister, and one of my roommates told our mother superior that I was planning to study in Europe. They didn’t believe me when I told them that the application wasn’t mine.”

“If you ignore politics in Congo, you get yourself killed!” replied Claude.

“Well, yes. I guess that was my problem. It was so unfair. My superior wanted to send me back to the convent, but I wasn’t finished with my studies and I was afraid to travel. Basankusu was controlled by Bemba’s militia, and they were raping women.⁶⁶ Killing women. She knew that; it’s why they were going to allow my sister to come stay with us in the first place. Why did she change her mind?”⁶⁷

When Sylvie refused her superior’s order, she was asked to leave her religious community of fifteen years. Cut adrift, she prayed every day and plunged into charity work, visiting hospitals and prisons. Then some of the prisoners she had met with escaped, and the police contacted her for questioning. “I didn’t even know they were political prisoners! I didn’t go there to try to influence people; I did it out of compassion. I visited them with food, to talk to

⁶⁶ Jean-Pierre Bemba, whose father was a close business associate of Mobutu’s, became the president’s personal assistant after completing his studies in Belgium. As a rebel military leader during the Second Congo War, Bemba was sworn in as vice-president in charge of finance during the interim presidency of Joseph Kabila, between 2003 and 2006. Subsequently, Bemba ran under the slogan “One Hundred Percent Congolese” in the country’s first multi-party elections, finishing second after Kabila on a slate of six candidates. Violent protest over the results resulted in a new election in October, which Kabila won by 70 percent.

⁶⁷ Under Bemba’s leadership and with support from the Ugandan government, the Movement of the Liberation of the Congo (MLC) established military control over the Equateur province following Mobutu’s death. The MLC and the Tutsi-led, Rwanda-supported *Rassemblement Congolais pour la Democratie* (RCD) attacked the DRC army in 1998, instigating the Second Congo War. Angolan, Zimbabwean, and Namibian armies entered the conflict in defense of the government. In 2016, Bemba was convicted by the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity associated with the MLC’s involvement in the Central African Republic, suppressing a coup attempt in 2002.

them and encourage them. I didn't understand why I was being summoned. I was a simple citizen."

"There's nothing simple about it," said Claude. "Especially in our country."

Sylvie told us the story of a fall from grace. She had been like a child after a decade in a provincial convent. Forced from the safety of her religious community, she had followed the dictum to live as Jesus would and found herself condemned as Jesus had been. "You hear stories in the market. Soldiers would come to get you in your house and you never returned. Then a man on our street disappeared, and I said to myself, 'I have to get out of here before it's too late.'"

Sylvie thanked God she had a passport. She had gotten a job in a cybercafé and knew people from the internet. "They were like rocks in a stream."

One day she crossed the river to Brazzaville, where she stayed for three weeks with a friend named Veronique, whom she had never met. Then someone named Coco invited her to come to Lomé. It could have been anywhere. But over a thousand Congolese refugees had also found their way to Togo, so the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) had set up an office there. Sylvie was granted asylum, placed in a rent-free apartment with a Congolese roommate, and paid a stipend of 50 Euros a month. The only requirement was that she participate in a job training program. She didn't have the patience to braid hair so they put her in computer classes. "Then they cut the stipend, and we had to make do [*debrouiller comme ca*]."

Sylvie eventually found another job in a cybercafé, where she was paid barely enough to feed herself. Everyone knew someone living abroad, but they didn't understand how to use the computers and would become frustrated with her when she couldn't solve their problems. "I always thought I was good at helping others. But it got so that I could barely take care of myself."

Sylvie lived in Togo for seven years, waiting for something to happen. She got along well with her roommate, but she missed her life with the sisters in the convent. “I can’t tell you how badly I wanted to go home. For some reason, I started staying at the church, praying night and day for a sign.” One morning when she went back to her room to change her clothes, she found the president of the local Congolese community waiting at the door. He told her that UNHCR had requested a meeting with her at seven the next morning.⁶⁸ “I was afraid. Afraid that they wouldn’t send me back and afraid that they would.”

At this point, Sylvie’s story slowed down and her speech took on a rehearsed yet animated, almost ritual quality. She used reported speech, framing herself as subject to the agency of others in the unfolding of events. “When I got there the woman at the front desk asked me, ‘Did you come for the interview?’ I didn’t know anything about an interview. Then she said, ‘You have to invite me to visit you one day in the United States!’ I was not expecting that. Oh Lord, what a surprise! May Your Will Be Done. While waiting there, I saw other refugees come, and they asked me, ‘Sylvie, have you been invited too? What are you doing here?’ And I told them, ‘I’m going to be your next president!’ They said, ‘But you’re a woman!’ And I said, ‘Sure, I’m a woman, but tomorrow I won’t be! If they’re planning to send me to the U.S., anything can happen!’”

Between July and December 2007, Sylvie underwent a series of interviews culminating in a meeting with an officer from the U.S. government who spoke very poor French. “I’ll never forget the morning I went back to the UN office to get my results! We were all standing outside at the gate, early in the morning, when somebody came out and told us that the officer from the

⁶⁸ The United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) is the international agency charged with coordinating refugee movements, including voluntary repatriation, local integration, or third-country resettlement.

U.S. had come back for only one person. It was me. Then they let us inside, gave us chairs, and we waited some more until the IOM representative came to give us the envelope.⁶⁹ My name doesn't begin with 'A,' but they gave it to me anyway. The representative said, 'I have an envelope that I'm going to give to one person. If that person accepts the terms of the letter, then everyone else will be able to leave as well.' I didn't know English—I didn't even *like* English—so another refugee had to translate it for all of us. Then the representative asked the translator to tell her what I said. I accepted the offer for all of us.”

Sylvie was clearly moved by this memory. It seemed to speak for itself yet was full of mystery. Refugee resettlement was as confusing as the Congolese government. Despite having been singled out during the initial stages of the resettlement process, she was not in the first group of refugees to leave Lomé. “One day I returned to the UNHCR secretary to find out what was going on, and she just looked at me. I asked her, ‘Why are you looking at me?’ And she said, ‘Because you are special.’ I was tired of hearing that, and I told her so. ‘They called the others, but they didn’t call me. What do you mean that I’m special?’ And she said to me, ‘Do you know the shepherd? How can the shepherd watch his flock if he leads the way? Because you are a shepherd, you can’t travel before anybody else because otherwise some people may be left behind. You are the pillar of the group. You must be the last to leave. Someday you will be the one to lead them home.’ I said, ‘I didn’t know that.’ And she said, ‘Now you know.’”

Sylvie’s experience of humanitarian grace exhibits the sweep of figural representation: from the hopeful present, the trials of the past appear to have been worth it. The linear ordering of her memories into narrative is authorized by characters who provide moral consensus, framing

⁶⁹ The International Organization of Migration (IOM) is an intergovernmental organization that provides a range of migration services to governments, including the transport of refugees accepted for resettlement.

her traumatic displacement with meaning and purpose. Perhaps Sylvie refined her story with numerous retellings as she moved through a legal process that was structured to deliver redemption from the site of trauma. As a Christian, she was already committed to the image of the crucifixion as just such an event, an act of self-sacrifice that fulfills the promise of exodus. A figure of trauma in the flesh, Jesus takes on the cumulative sins of the past and launches history towards salvation. Reinhart Koselleck elaborates on the ways in which political and economic developments in the early modern period extended this eschatological horizon, replacing prophecy with prognosis, and with it, a secular telos of human freedom in empty, homogenous time.⁷⁰ An all-knowing God is replaced by Kant's categorical imperative of duty, a command that entails the capacity to possess intention as the vision of a cosmopolitan heaven on earth. You can because you must!⁷¹ Towards this "kingdom of ends," the international community offers the remedies of humanitarianism through which the victims of history are relieved of their suffering, and human rights that grant them the right to speak on their own behalf.

Of course, Sylvie's story didn't end with the happy anticipation of justice. Her "ever after" began at the end of April 2008, when she was finally summoned to travel. "They drove us to Ghana in an IOM vehicle, and we spent an entire week in a hotel in Accra. Every day the owner would come to us and tell us, 'If you have any problems, call me.' He didn't want any

⁷⁰ Reinhart Koselleck, "Modernity and the Planes of Historicity," *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 9–25. Janet Roitman, *Fiscal Disobedience: An Anthropology of Economic Regulation in Central Africa* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 25–31.

⁷¹ "Only that which is connected with my will merely as a ground, never as an effect, only what does not serve my inclination but outweighs it, or at least wholly excludes it from the reckoning in a choice, hence only the mere law for itself, can be an object of respect and hence a command." Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. A.W. Wood (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 16.

problems with *les Americains*. ‘You are Africans but while you are here you are not treated as Africans but as American subjects.’ We thought the hard times were over!”

Sylvie wasn’t smiling now. She lowered her leg gingerly and limped to the bathroom. Claude and I sat in silence for a few moments. “You don’t know how many times I’ve heard this story,” he murmured.

“From Sylvie?” I asked.

“Not only from Sylvie.”

She seemed so tired when she returned that I thought about ending the interview. It was Claude who insisted that we continue. “You got here during the recession,” he said. “I think I applied for twenty jobs” I knew that he was still applying, and that nothing ever came through.

“I couldn’t find work,” she echoed him. “Every time I went for an interview, my English wasn’t good enough. Lord it was hard! Harder than Togo even. I had Food Stamps and a little cash, but I had to pay the rent with that, and there wasn’t *anything* left over. I would cry at night and pray. I said, ‘Lord, why did you bring me to this country if I don’t have enough to eat?’ I couldn’t afford soap, milk, or lotion for my skin. And I was so lonely. You have no idea how lonely I was.”

“That’s when we met,” he reminded her. Pastor Nkara from the Congolese Community Church had put them in touch. They were both Bamongo. “That was right before Christmas,” she remembered. Then a woman in the congregation offered to put in a word for her at the nursing home where she worked. “They told me that they only needed people for Saturday and Sunday, which was better than nothing. ‘Please, Lord,’ I prayed, ‘if this work is mine, let them take me.’”

Then, when I went down there for the interview, the director never asked me a single question. He just looked at me, smiling, and I knew I had been chosen.”

Sylvie told me she loved her job cleaning rooms for elderly people. “It was just like when I was in the convent. When I come in every morning, they want to see me. They call me Sunshine! They say, ‘We are happy to have you on our floor! You give us life every day!’” After a year, Sylvie was finally promoted to full-time, and two months ago she picked up a second job so that she could send more money home to her family.

“Don’t you think you work too much?” I asked her.

“What else do I have to do? That’s the way it is for us. I stay in touch with my family—yes, they are my family—who came with me from Togo. My roommate, she cleans rooms in a hotel downtown. Another woman, she went to Ohio and works as a seamstress in a factory. A man in Texas cooks in a restaurant. The ones in Hawaii work in a nursing home. I stay in touch with them on the internet. And then there’s Claude and Rebecca. They’re my friends! You’re my friend!” She reached out and took my hand. Then she laughed. “I know people, but I don’t have much time. They say, ‘Oh, let’s go out dancing,’ and I say, ‘No, I’ve got to work. Or I’ve got to clean my apartment.’ Then I put my Congolese music on. I put on my TV. If you call on the phone, you’re going to say that I have a party going on! My best friend the TV is talking to me.”

Sylvie’s story had followed an arc from the purity of an innocent to a theological investment in the truth of salvation, before landing in a *losako*. “The image burns the pupil of the eye,” remarked Claude in Lomongo, and she laughed again. “*L’image berne la pupille de l’oeil*,” she translated for me, adding that the word for “image” also meant “shadow.” She and Claude shared the language of ambivalence, and if she reserved her mimicry for a denouement that did not end as it should, its friction was always just under the surface, inciting her visions of grace.

If recollection is a method for positioning the self, then mythologizing of the past may be a strategy for managing risk by forgetting the present. In his interview with Baba Ngoie, for example, Fabian teases out nostalgic references to colonialism and Mobutu's "revolution" as linguistic icons of "the political 'shuffle and dance' people are forced to put on when they want to talk about a regime."⁷² Ngoie was hired in 1923 as the first Congolese clerk of the Elisabethville branch of the *Banque du Congo Belge*, where he worked until his retirement in 1962. Thus, a certain facility at evading abuses of power leads him to recall evidence of moral righteousness over the passions of politics and popular culture. Likewise, Sylvie's warmth and compassion, while entirely sincere, distorts her account in ways that disavow trauma.

It is likely that Sylvie's narrative has its origins in a UNHCR adjudication process for which a "well-founded fear of persecution" is a condition of approval. Whether that fear is justified is a legal question of objective fact. Whether her fear is traumatic is a medical question of subjective fact. That subjective facts exist at all is a psychoanalytical question with knotty anthropological implications. Does the concept of trauma even make sense without a bourgeois theory of the subject? Each of these disciplinary problems are relevant to the politics of trauma, which brings us full circle to the refugee's figural representation, a story that preserves the meaning of an event in a legally compelling form. This is Auerbach's mimesis in the symbolic register, testimony as a literary genre that inserts the self as a protagonist in history. Furthermore, the legal stakes of the refugee story amplify its "illocutionary force," J. L. Austin's term for the intention of a speech act.⁷³ These intentions have pragmatic efficacy that is also metapragmatic: in telling her story, Sylvie self-consciously frames her relation to herself and others. Thus, the

⁷² Fabian, "Forgetful Remembering," 501.

⁷³ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1962), 99.

performance of refugee testimony indexes trauma both metonymically, by referencing political crisis, and metaphorically, by referencing other stories that apply similar tropes to achieve the same results. These two semiotic registers, which parallel Auerbach's and Benjamin's distinct approaches to mimesis, are ambivalent in their mutual relation to the real of existence.⁷⁴ In fact, as Constantine Nakassis has argued, the communicative act is only effective by virtue of this ambivalence. The mediation of the narrative form, which points to immediate experience, is itself a form of immediacy that shapes that experience. Trauma is a word for the specter of authenticity that drives the performance of testimony for both the speaker and her audience as an experience that indefinitely repeats itself.

The ambivalent ground of trauma has provided shaky foundations for a politics of justice. As a moral imperative, human rights are an ideal form that must remain at a distance from the pragmatics of daily life. According to Kant, the pure practical reason of the categorical imperative is a universal end for all means. Its absolute necessity anchors a rule of law that orders the contingency of the world. The problem with a transcendental notion of the good, however, is that its condition of possibility, the opposing term of evil, must also be necessary in order for the ideal to be realized. That human rights cannot be acknowledged as means in themselves has the perverse effect of justifying suffering as evidence of its necessity. As in Christianity, the witness of injustice is blessed as worthy of grace, even as unjust conditions are deemed an unavoidable aspect of the world as we know it. For Christians, the promise of otherworldly salvation may be compensation for the pain of existence. In this respect, human rights may be understood as a secular theology promising a better future. Insofar as this Christian

⁷⁴ See Constantine V. Nakassis, "Indexicality's Ambivalent Ground," *Signs and Society* 6, no. 1 (2018): 281–304. For a semiotic analysis of refugee testimony, see Jan Blommaert, "Language, Asylum, and the National Order," *Current Anthropology* 50, no. 4 (2009): 415–41.

eschatology is not shared by all the world's people, the human rights paradigm is a political commitment demanding conversion to the Kantian expectations of liberal modernity.⁷⁵

The refugee is the archetypal figure within the symbolic order of humanitarian reason. Sylvie's story featured a childlike victim who, having been forced to leave home against her will, bears witness to past suffering. It also gestures towards aspirations for a more just world in which she will return. Her determination as a deserving migrant was predicated on this therapeutic conversion of pain into testimony, which affirms the individual within a community of suffering others and produces knowledge for political intervention.⁷⁶ Through the articulation of trauma, the person testifies to a collective memory that achieves recognition in the court of historical reckoning.⁷⁷ But what if there is no affirmative position, after the event of humanitarian grace, for a subject to constitute itself through the backward glance of narration?

Both Auerbach and Benjamin observed that modern history repeats itself through a logic of deferral. The ongoing displacement of historical certainty is at the core of Auerbach's method, which applies a provisional repertoire of conceptual tools to particular details that are harvested with care from literary texts. The Jewish Auerbach was a German scholar with an established reputation when he was forced into exile by the Nazis. Written in Istanbul during the war, *Mimesis* explicitly positioned the Hebrew bible as a literary text within a canon that was being

⁷⁵ Talal Asad, "What do Human Rights Do? An Anthropological Inquiry," *Theory and Event* 4, no. 4 (2000): 1–33; and Meister, *After Evil*, 117–24. Both Asad and Meister stress the function of racial ideology in this political conversion.

⁷⁶ Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood*, trans. Rachel Gomme (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

⁷⁷ For Koselleck, historical knowledge is driven by adjustments to the dashed expectations of those on the losing side of conflict. "Their first primary experience is that everything happened differently from how it was planned or hoped. If they reflect methodologically at all, they face a greater burden of proof to explain why something happened in this and not the anticipated way. If history is made in the short run by the victors, historical gains in knowledge stem in the long run from the vanquished." Reinhart Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, trans. Jobst Welge (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 76.

reconstituted as *völkish* philology. Thus, his “perspectival formation of judgement” was a politics of representation that countered Aryan historiography by relativizing the ideology of criticism.⁷⁸ His friend Benjamin, exiled in Paris, melded Jewish mysticism and Marxism into an anti-politics of affect that turned ideology against itself. For Benjamin, the threat was not a deficit of justice but its impossibility.

“The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed,” he wrote. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.⁷⁹

Though Benjamin killed himself after being detained by the Gestapo, he did not identify national socialism as the root of evil. The most angelic defenders of human rights have no ground to stand on while the accelerating dialectic of capitalist accumulation sweeps rights-bearing subjects into the wreckage of their own livelihoods. Facing backward, they are driven by a unilinear temporality that erases what must be forgotten in order to justify what is. History exposes progress as toxic waste only after the fact, once it’s too late to do anything about it. This is how, while we asymptotically approach the moment when we can say “never again,” putting our differences behind us and sharing in the wealth of the world, mimetic patterns of desire and millenarian expectations reassert themselves in traumatic repetition.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Eric Auerbach, *Mimesis*, trans. W.R. Trask, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 573.

Also see Avihu Zakai and David Weinstein, “Erich Auerbach and His ‘Figura’: An Apology for the Old Testament in an Age of Aryan Philology,” *Religions* 3 (2012): 320–38.

⁷⁹ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. H. Arendt and trans. H. Zohn (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), 257–58. Benjamin and Auerbach were in correspondence while in exile and developing their respective thoughts on mimesis. See Karlheinz Barck and Anthony Reynolds, “Walter Benjamin and Erich Auerbach: Fragments of a Correspondence,” *Diacritics* 22, nos. 3-4 (1992): 81–83.

⁸⁰ Meister, *After Evil*, 144–174.

The Thing and Illusion

During a memorable speech to the students of Cheikh Anta Diop University in 2007, French President Nicolas Sarkozy confessed that Africa was the category through which modernity knew itself. His remarks rehearsed a colonial imaginary of “Africa” that never tires of replaying itself, from the earliest encounters between European and African merchants to contemporary geopolitics. “In this universe where nature commands all,” he proclaimed, “man escapes from the anguish of history that torments modern man, but he rests immobile in the centre of a static order where everything seems to have been written beforehand.”⁸¹ Extolling Africa as a “marvelous imaginary world” possessing ancestral wisdom that “came from the depths of time,” Sarkozy diagnosed its underdevelopment as the consequence of a preoccupation with immediate experience. Rather than dwell in nostalgia for a “lost childhood paradise,” Africans should finally embrace the colonizer’s gift of universality, that “great mix of the human spirit” that brought them railroads, reason, and antibiotics.

In a single gesture, Sarkozy’s speech acknowledged and sidelined the crimes of history. “No one can pretend that this mistake was not committed,” he said, and then: “No one can ask of the generations of today to expiate this crime perpetrated by past generations. No one can ask of the sons to repent for the mistakes of their fathers.” As Sarkozy would have it, Africa’s economic and financial hardships have been the consequence of a mass psychosis. African countries cannot claim justice within an international community of nations until they free themselves from a childlike attachment to cultural particularity. The ideals of freedom and progress—which are only accidentally related to atrocities committed by the dead—require the surrender of outdated resentments. The “elite youth of Africa” should take up that legacy of their own hybrid past most

⁸¹ Nicholas Sarkozy, *Address at the University of Cheikh Anta Diop*, Dakar, Senegal, July 26, 2007.

worthy of emulation: the capacity to participate in the general exchange of all things—material and symbolic, moral and monetary. In this idealized marketplace, Africanity can be leveraged for profit: “In order to exchange it is necessary to have something to give, to talk to others, it is necessary to have something to say to them.”

African intellectuals received this message with incredulity. As Achille Mbembe pointed out at the time, Sarkozy’s language reflected the cultural hubris of a French ruling elite that continued to view Africa according to their worst fears and fantasies.⁸² The speechwriter’s sources were obvious: Hegel’s 1822 *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, inflected with the romance of early twentieth-century ethnography. For Hegel, history could find no purchase in Africa because Africans did not understand themselves as the self-referential subjects of representational thought. “Life there consists of a succession of contingent happenings and surprises,” he reasoned. “No aim or state exists whose development could be followed; and there is no subjectivity, but merely a series of subjects who destroy one another.”⁸³ That Hegel knew nothing about Africa was irrelevant to the logical assertion that it was the concrete dispositive of an abstract civilization. For the European colonizers imposing their conceptual forms on a world full of content, Africa represented a source of energy and materiality—slave and migrant labor, food, oil, and minerals—that could not govern itself. Sarkozy’s speech reprised this motif of a “black essence” in dynamic opposition to a European subject that gives that essence form. “How

⁸² The African critique of European philosophy emerged among the first generation of *évolués* during the colonial period. See V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1988).

⁸³ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 176.

then, can one be surprised that his definition of the continent and its people is ultimately purely negative?" Mbembe asks.⁸⁴

Of paramount concern was Sarkozy's unwillingness to recognize the knowledge produced by Africans about Africa. As Congolese Jacques Depelchin puts it, writing about Africa has always been dominated by a polarized struggle between predominantly non-African positivists who describe what they see and predominantly non-African activists who oppose the positivists on behalf of Africans, then celebrate those efforts as social justice.⁸⁵ Lost in the din of debate is the missing truth of the historical fact. The names of history refer to a two-fold absence: both the immediacy of experience and the mediation of African protagonists themselves. Yet "between the syndromes of discovery and abolition" lies the silence of those who have been there all along. Insofar as this dynamic structures Africanist scholarship, Depelchin does not exempt himself: "I am sure that even as I am attempting to unveil silences, I will be reproducing others."⁸⁶ Indeed, following Jacques Ranciere, he locates the problem in the disavowal of ambivalence that is intrinsic to a belief in the authority of historical narrative.⁸⁷ The disregard for African knowledge and the subjection of Africans to slavery and colonialism are both symptoms of a conceptual opposition that repeats itself as the organizing logic of modernity. The silence of

⁸⁴ Achille Mbembe, "Nicolas Sarkozy's Africa," *Africultures* (August 8, 2007): Article 6816, <http://www.africultures.com>; also see Achille Mbembe, "Time on the Move," in *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 1–23.

⁸⁵ Jacques Depelchin, *Silences in African History: Between the Syndromes of Discovery and Abolition*. (Dar Es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota Publishers, 2005).

⁸⁶ Depelchin, 10.

⁸⁷ Jacques Ranciere, *The Names of History: On the Poetics of Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994). Insofar as any hegemonic discourse has this silencing effect, women are likewise sidelined in oral traditions. Abreham Alemu, "Oral Narrative as Ideological Weapon for Subordinating Women: The Case of Jimma Oromo," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 19, no. 1 (2007): 55–79.

history is the mimetic indeterminacy that is arbitrated—discovered, created, and eliminated—every time a story gets told.

Indeed, Sarkozy presumed to speak this indeterminacy when he described Africa as a potential asset. “I have come to tell you that you don’t have to be ashamed of the values of African civilisation, that they do not drag you down but elevate you, that they are an antidote to the materialism and the individualism that enslave modern man, that they are the most precious of legacies against the dehumanisation and the ‘uniformisation’ of the world of today.” African values are not only a cause of failure or default, but also a spiritual source of capital, or credit-worthiness. Central to his fantasy, distilled into French public consciousness over three centuries, is an affect of longing and disgust for the primitive past, a two-sided “savage slot” that serves as a mirror for the modern subject.⁸⁸ This is why, while he pathologized Africans for having a story about themselves, he was also effusive in his identification of common origins: “Africa has reminded all the peoples of the earth that they shared the same infancy.” In this discourse, the silence of history makes an appearance as “gnosis,” esoteric knowledge that eludes capture. Mudimbe shows how even the most sympathetic European ethnographers of colonial Africa—structural functionalists or missionaries like Hulstaert—subscribed to an evolutionary telos “from magic through religion to science; from savagery to barbarism to civilization; from sexual promiscuity through matrilineality and finally to patrilineality.”⁸⁹ However equal they imagined their relationships with Africans to be, they perpetuated the formative opposition that kept Africa on the side of mystery and libidinal drive. As Jean and John Comaroff have argued, this dialectic between law and disorder has been the central preoccupation of postcolonial governments, which

⁸⁸ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, “Anthropology and the Savage Slot: The Poetics and Politics of Otherness,” in *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present* (Santa Fe, NM: SARS Press, 1991).

⁸⁹ V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*, 81.

extract lucrative returns by “actively sustaining zones of ambiguity between the presence and absence of the law.”⁹⁰

However, if Africa has historically served the West as the virtual disorder that makes order possible, what happens when that narrative of progress fails? Perhaps this is the anxiety that led a new French president to raid the philosophical archives for his debut in Dakar, once the brightest star in the firmament of French colonial possessions. “The United States and China are already busy conquering Africa,” Sarkozy chastised an audience in Toulon shortly before his election. “How long is Europe going to wait before it starts building the Africa of tomorrow? While Europe wavers, others are forging ahead.”⁹¹ His identification of capital investment with national interest indicated nostalgia for an era when states were directing the global economy. Today, development funding is less about foreign policy than the profitability of debt. During my fieldwork, this was particularly evident in the case of China: While the U.S. continued to dwarf China in official development assistance (ODA), the two countries developed similar financial portfolios in Africa between 2000 and 2014.⁹² China had become the region’s largest creditor, with loans from state banks providing ready financing on tougher terms and to poorer countries than World Bank aid packages or American commercial banks.⁹³ Observers called President Xi

⁹⁰ Jean and John L. Comaroff, “Law and Disorder in the Postcolony: An Introduction,” in *Law and Order in the Postcolony* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 5.

⁹¹ Dominic Thomas, “The Adventures of Sarkozy in Euroafrica,” *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 16, no. 3 (2012): 393–94.

⁹² African project portfolios were worth \$354.3 billion for China and \$394.6 billion for the U.S. between 2000 and 2014. However, 93 percent of U.S. spending was in the form of Official Development Assistance (ODA), whereas 77 percent of Chinese financing moved through commercial channels. Alex Wooley and Soren Patterson, “AidData Releases First-Ever Global Dataset on China’s Development Spending Spree,” *AIDDATA* (Williamsburg, VA: College of William and Mary, 2017). Also see Axel Dreher et al., “Apples and Dragon Fruits: The Determinants of Aid and Other Forms of State Financing from China to Africa,” *International Studies Quarterly* 62 (2018): 182–94.

⁹³ Wenjie Chen and Roger Nord, “China and Africa: Crouching Lion, Retreating Dragon?” in *Foresight Africa* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institute, 2018). American investors worry that Chinese liquidity creates an unfair advantage in competitive bidding for large state contracts. See Edward Wong,

Jinping's trillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative "debt-trap diplomacy."⁹⁴ Yet counterproposals were primarily concerned with gaining market share in a "new scramble for Africa."⁹⁵

In the years after Sarkozy's *faux pas* in Dakar, Africa's attractiveness to other investors and the constraints of membership in the European Union only intensified the French preoccupation with its declining global influence. Shortly after taking office in 2017, Emmanuel Macron toured the former French colonies, distancing himself from the neocolonial spirit of his predecessors. Yet careless remarks on the campaign trail about Africa's "civilizational problem" paved the way for a skeptical reception.⁹⁶ Macron's promotion of security measures to block emigration, defense of the French-dominated currency, and military interventions in Mali and Chad were signature policies of "Francafrique" and "the ultimate symbol of a confiscated, perverted sovereignty" that characterized the political economy of francophone Africa since independence.⁹⁷ Presidential disavowal of neo-imperial ambitions was nothing new. Shortly before his death in 1997, Gaullist operative Jacques Foccart confessed his central role in the brutal vetting and control of leadership in the new nations.⁹⁸ Resorting to bribery and

"Competing Against Chinese Loans, U.S. Companies Face Long Odds in Africa," *New York Times*, January 13, 2019.

⁹⁴ See Sam Parker and Gabrielle Chefetz, "China's Debtbook Diplomacy: How China is Turning Bad Loans into Strategic Investments," *The Diplomat*, May 30, 2018; and Sébastien Le Belzic, "La Chine cherche un second soufflé pour ses 'routes de la soie' en Afrique," *Le Monde*, 18 Avril 2019.

⁹⁵ For example, see Mark Landler and Edward Wong, "Bolton Outlines a Strategy for Africa That's Really About Countering China," *New York Times*, December 13, 2018. A 2017 analysis led by Deborah Bräutigam argued that Chinese patterns of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) is not radically different in its motivation and diversification from other countries; government efforts to encourage domestic investment abroad is driven by large amounts of foreign reserves, the need for raw materials, and competition with Western multinationals. Deborah Brautigam et al., "Chinese Investment in Africa: How Much do We Know?" Private Enterprise Development in Low-Income Countries (PEDL) Synthesis Series No. 2, December 1, 2018.

⁹⁶ Pape Samba Kane, "Macron's francafrique," *AlJazeera*, July 2017.

⁹⁷ Boubacar Boris Diop, "Françafrique: A Brief History of a Scandalous Word," *New African*, March 23, 2018.

⁹⁸ Jacques Foccart, *Foccart Parle: Entretiens avec Philippe Gaillard* (Paris: Jeune Afrique, 1995).

assassination, France was committed to preventing U.S. and Russia from eclipsing France in terms of influence in the region, a mission that extended to the previously Belgian Congo.

For many African elites during the early years of independence, the separation anxiety was mutual. Frantz Fanon once referred to Felix Houphouët-Boigny, who would become the first president of Côte d'Ivoire, as “the traveling salesman of French colonialism.”⁹⁹ Gabonese Prime Minister Léon M'ba would have preferred French departmental status over independence and incorporated the *tricolore* into an early version of the national flag.¹⁰⁰ “You are our fetish,” Maurice Yaméogo is reported to have told Foccart shortly after occupying the presidency of Upper Volta, now Burkina Faso, in 1960. Neocolonial agreements would lock these countries into decades of political and economic subordination. However, the visionaries of postcolonial Africa had hoped for a more balanced partnership. In the critical years following World War II, Sedar Senghor joined forces with fellow negritude poet Aimé Césaire from Martinique in an effort to transform the French empire into a post-national federation of self-governing members. Senghor rejected the principle of sovereignty, both as a model of democratic participation and a geopolitical reality. As a leader he pledged to “resist one of the temptations of the nation-state, which is the standardization of persons across countries ... the impoverishment of persons, their reduction to robot individuals, their loss of sap and juice.”¹⁰¹

In his attempt to leverage African values from a position of exclusion, Senghor's writings could well have served as source material for Sarkozy's speechwriter. Nevertheless, such a

⁹⁹ Frantz Fanon, “Letter to the Youth of Africa,” in *Toward the African Revolution*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1967), 117.

¹⁰⁰ Alexander Keese, “L'Evolution du ‘leader indigène’ aux yeux des administrateurs français: Léon M'Ba et le changement des modalités de participation au pouvoir local au Gabon, 1922-1967,” *Afrique et histoire* 1, no. 2 (2004): 141–70.

¹⁰¹ Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 223.

reading deprives Senghor's utopian "Civilization of the Universal" of its subversive intent, which was to decolonize modernity by speculating on Africa as the future of the world rather than speculating on Africa's future. Imperialism was already undermining sovereignty, Senghor argued, by institutionalizing the interdependency of diverse societies. In this respect, African forms of life—characterized by cultural hybridity and a commitment to hospitality—were vital to the emerging world order, a "black gift" that requested universal freedom in return, for both colonizer and colonized, from the geographical and temporal provincialism of Western civilization.¹⁰² At the brink of independence, Senghor predicted that without equality among partners, such as he believed was possible within a Republic, the reliance of the metropole on colonial resources would remain exploitative and one-sided. External objective conditions would compel former colonies to continue providing raw materials and a reserve army of the unemployed to factories in the metropole, and their people would be expected to consume the commodities produced by those industries without enjoying the social investments of surplus value production. As Senghor had feared, arrangements of colonial enterprise and public administration persisted in ways that undermined the possibility for regional, much less national autonomy, even during the relatively prosperous years of the fledgling African states.

During the "*trentes glorieuses*" following World War II, both liberal economists and Marxists expected trade and investment to distribute capital, leading to either the global expansion of a consumer class or the emergence of a revolutionary proletariat. In 1960, the year of African independence, American economic historian Walt Rostow predicted in a series of lectures at Cambridge University that economies built around the export of primary commodities would repeat the "stages of economic growth" that had characterized Anglo-European

¹⁰² Wilder, 61.

industrialization. His development model could accelerate this process, he argued, by introducing the technology to diversify domestic processing, which would also provide jobs to support the consumption of those goods.¹⁰³ The same year, Marxist historian C .L. R. James returned to his hometown of Port of Spain, Trinidad, to deliver a series of lectures in which he predicted that “the social order of the future is an international socialist order with classes in command ... who have got rid of the nationalist ideas, the nationalist policies and the nationalist economics of the bourgeois national state.”¹⁰⁴

Why didn't these visions come to pass? While the Cold War eviscerated socialist politics in the West, development policies continued to favor imports from the U.S. and Europe, not only for manufactured goods but also for food. African economies continued to support themselves with cash crops and natural resources, as they had during the colonial era. Jobs never materialized, but Africans moved into cities anyway. The result was not urban prosperity or a radicalized proletariat, but a burgeoning informal economy and the gradual loss of agricultural self-sufficiency. Balance-of-payments deficits grew while elites spent, saved, and invested their export earnings abroad. Meanwhile, the Bretton Woods' and United Nations' systems gave rise to an international development infrastructure that served the interests of its most powerful members.¹⁰⁵ As long as the industrial economies of the Global North continued to expand, robust

¹⁰³ W. W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-communist Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960). Inspired by this treatise, John F. Kennedy hired Rostow, first as a national security advisor and then director of the State Department's policy planning staff. He would become a leading architect of Cold War development policy as special assistant for national security affairs under Lyndon Johnson from 1966 to 1969.

¹⁰⁴ C. L.R. James, *Modern Politics* (Detroit: Bewick Editions, 1973), 92–93. Another important intervention during this period was Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London: Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications, 1973).

¹⁰⁵ Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

demand for materials and labor from African countries generated the appearance of growth. However, a growing proportion of domestic consumption was being financed through loans.¹⁰⁶ When the postwar boom slowed down in the late 1960s, prices for primary commodities dropped while import costs rose, weakening terms of trade and exacerbating poverty throughout Africa, Latin America, and much of Asia. Export-dependent countries were forced to increase production, glutting world markets and reducing prices further, which intensified dependency on international financing. Meanwhile, in the service of Cold War allegiances and in response to domestic unrest, African governments applied the techniques of law and order inherited from the laboratories of colonial governance.¹⁰⁷

“Dollar diplomacy” was the pillar on which U.S. geopolitical hegemony rested even before Nixon’s abandonment of the gold standard in 1971. The United States poured capital into Europe and Japan after World War II, providing enough exports and foreign investment to absorb most of the world’s gold. Later, as spending on the Vietnam War and Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty created twin balance-of-payment and domestic budget deficits, the United States was able to flood the world with dollars without causing inflation because its creditors had no choice but to continue buying Treasury bonds. By converting trade surpluses into dollars, European and Japanese central banks were effectively lending the difference in exchange rates to the United States, both financing the Cold War and subsidizing American prosperity. If they refused this arrangement, their currencies would rise and the dollar would fall, pricing their

¹⁰⁶ Michael Hudson, *Global Fracture: The New International Economic Order* (London: Pluto Press, 2005), 37–38.

¹⁰⁷ See Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-politics, Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); and John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution, Vol. 2: The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

exports out of world markets.¹⁰⁸ The United States enjoyed an equally advantageous position among its debtors, who absorbed agricultural surplus and provided cheap access to natural resources, particularly oil.

The OPEC embargo of 1973 was above all a monetary crisis. High oil prices created a balance-of-payment deficit in every country that depended on oil imports to power industrial production. The shock to international currency markets brought the industrialized countries to their knees and decimated struggling African economies.¹⁰⁹ The U.S. was able to preserve the stability and centrality of its currency by secretly convincing Saudi Arabia, the largest oil producer in the world, to store most of their wealth in long-term Treasury bonds rather than working through the Bretton Woods system—International Financial Institutions (IFIs) such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank—to distribute their surplus. In this way, the U.S. managed inflation without major decreases in domestic spending. As lender of last resort, it was able to print money to pay for oil and other imports without balancing the budget.

¹⁰⁸ The U.S. accumulated a \$50 billion payment deficit between April 1968 and March 1973, all of which was absorbed by foreign central banks. They had no choice but to maintain their currency reserves in dollars in order to support the exchange rate. A surplus in circulation would result in a depreciation, which would have further enhanced the trade advantage of U.S. exporters. Eventually, however, a depreciation in the value of U.S. Treasury bonds further benefited U.S. investors by increasing the value of their investments in higher-yielding corporate bonds and mortgage loans abroad. Foreign governments had little option but to reinvest dollar earnings from these investments in low-yield U.S. Treasury obligations. Foreign demand for these Treasury securities drove up their price and reduced U.S. interest rates, further encouraging capital outflows to Europe and Japan. Michael Hudson, *Super-Imperialism* (London: Pluto Press, 2003), 29.

¹⁰⁹ “The proud, if somewhat meaningless and relatively modest, achievements of aggregate per capita growth rates of about 1.6 percent during the 1960s dropped to less than one percent during the 1970s, with the prospect of near stagnation for the 1980s, especially for the non-oil-exporting African countries.” Willard R. Johnson and Ernest J. Wilson, III (1982), “The ‘Oil Crises’ and African Economies: Oil Wave on a Tidal Flood of Industrial Price Inflation,” *Daedalus* 111, no. 2 (1982): 211–12.

However, these unilateral arrangements had the effect of shifting the burden of the U.S. deficit onto the debtors of last resort, countries least able to afford it.¹¹⁰

In the 1970s, Africa became synonymous with poverty. Droughts coincided with declining export volumes and prohibitive import costs to dramatically undermine food security. African countries borrowed heavily from both IFIs and commercial lenders in order to sustain their public sectors, service their growing debts, and in many cases, enrich heads of state who held onto power through regimes of terror. Their circumstances were exacerbated by a second oil shock in 1979, which combined with the growing glut of dollars in capital markets and forced the Federal Reserve to raise interest rates. Chairman Paul Volcker's decision to raise the price of the dollar was the turning point that would gradually financialize the global economy.¹¹¹ However, the austerity policies that would convert debt into assets were first introduced not in the U.S., but in the debtor countries that had been pushed towards default by the "Volcker Shock." They were mired in a double debt crisis: forced to finance trade deficits with loans that increased with the value of the currency in which they must be paid. However, the banks were willing to extend their loans indefinitely, as long as political leaders demonstrated creditworthiness that could be "banked on"—that is, meet regular payments so that their debts could be securitized in capital markets.¹¹² A Washington Consensus of academics and policymakers came up with a new regime of financial governance that systematized the

¹¹⁰ David E. Spiro, *The Hidden Hand of American Hegemony: Petrodollar Recycling and International Markets* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).

¹¹¹ Greta R. Krippner, *Capitalizing on Crisis: The Political Origins of the Rise of Finance*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 86–105; Adam Tooze, *Crashed: How a Decade of Financial Crises Changed the World* (New York: Viking, 2018), 44–46.

¹¹² See Sarah Bracking, *Money and Power: Great Predators in the Political Economy of Development* (London: Pluto Press, 2009), 20–21.

circulation of sovereign debt.¹¹³ In order to qualify for further credit, without which they could not run their governments, African countries were required to fully monetize their economies, eviscerating public investment to support asset liquidity. By 1990, average per capita income was lower than it had been at the beginning of the 1960s.¹¹⁴

In international development circles, structural adjustment was a story of tough love that disciplined dysfunctional states to promote sustainable growth in the future. “Structural adjustment is like virtue: no one can oppose it,” quipped a Zambian participant at a policy forum sponsored by the World Bank in 1988.¹¹⁵ States were permitted to operate at a deficit as long as they had sufficient foreign exchange in the central bank at any particular moment to guarantee their obligations. When these reserves ran out, however, continued financing was predicated on a country’s demonstrated capacity to meet the discipline of payments. Thus, debtor states had to channel as much capital as possible away from domestic spending and towards the expansion of trade revenue. State enterprises were sold at “fire sale” prices to foreign investors while export profits slumped due to saturated global markets. Formal employment, per capita income, and the value of domestic currency plummeted, cutting deeply into prospects for the young people fleeing the countryside in droves, seeking livelihoods in urban slums or overseas.

¹¹³ The term “Washington Consensus” was coined by English economist John Williamson in 1989 to refer to a set of ten standard economic policy prescriptions for indebted developing countries. By that time, the World Bank, IMF, and the U.S. Treasury had established this package of “structural adjustments” in most of sub-Saharan Africa. See Cadman Atta Mills, *Structural Adjustment in Sub-Saharan Africa*, EDI Policy Seminar Report, Number 18 (Washington DC: World Bank, 1989).

¹¹⁴ The manifest symptoms of “Africa’s Growth Tragedy” drew diagnoses from across the disciplinary and political spectrum. See Carol Lancaster, “Africa’s Economic Crisis,” *Foreign Policy* 52 (1983):149–66; and Giovanni Arrighi, “The African Crisis” World Systemic and Regional Aspects,” *New Left Review* 15 (2002): 5–36.

¹¹⁵ Mills, *Structural Adjustment*, 5.

Today, what the diversifying economies of Africa have in common with the digital economies of Euro-America is a growing reliance on global financial governance and the communications infrastructure that makes it possible. Classical development theory was predicated on the liberal conceptualization of a self-governing nation-state that served the collective interests of its members by managing its economy. Fifty years later, the debt crisis that was particular to the developing world has become an enduring feature of economies everywhere, much to the surprise of the U.S. debtors and employees who fell victim to the run on derivatives in 2008. As revealed by the bailout, the financial state enjoys an inverted relation to its public: rather than the government serving the people, the tax base served as collateral for Treasury bonds. When the threat of default by the financial sector invoked a state of emergency, the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act of 2008 did not reconstitute the authority of the state; quite the contrary, it was revealed to have lost its monopoly on violence.¹¹⁶ Increasingly, donor countries must discipline their accounts in ways that resemble the requirements for development states, treating national wealth not as a resource for public consumption but as a source of double securitization: supporting a military that manages risk and a reserve that guarantees debt.

With financialization, the political authority of the legislative process is superceded by management principles that enshrine freedom of contract. Lawfare—defined by John Comaroff in the postcolonial context as “the effort to conquer and control indigenous peoples by the coercive use of legal means”—has become the predominant technique of a global regime of governance.¹¹⁷ Annelise Riles demonstrates how lawfare operates, not only as punitive structural

¹¹⁶ “Lawmaking is power making,” writes Walter Benjamin, “and, to that extent, an immediate manifestation of violence.” Walter Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” in *Reflections* (New York: Schocken, 1978), 295.

¹¹⁷ John L. Comaroff, “Colonialism, Culture and the Law,” *Law and Social Inquiry* 26, no. 2 (2001): 306.

adjustments, but also as collateral that serves as a measure of legitimacy.¹¹⁸ Rules appear to have clear economic objectives: the protection of intellectual property rights or the regulation of international trade. Yet this “virtual transparency” is itself a form of collateral knowledge that authorizes the securities that hedge risk in the absence of state protection. “Legal reforms that seem at first blush to capitulate to global demands for the privatization of state power therefore serve as a kind of shield from the pressures to do things the globally standard way.”¹¹⁹ In other words, neoliberal lawfare performed an ideology that obscured its collateral function in capital markets. Like the structural adjustments of development policy, shifting boundaries between public and private authority in domestic and international law create opportunities to arbitrage the uncertain play of forces that drive the market.

During my fieldwork, the ascendancy of China’s “alternative development model” reflected this shift in the conception of national sovereignty from the expression of collective will to guarantor of contracts. China’s innovation had been to eschew the political collateral of conditional loans, fully exposing themselves and their creditors to market risk.¹²⁰ Not unlike Saudi Arabia during the oil embargo, China’s trade surplus generated a surfeit of foreign reserves that threatened the stability of its own currency. Thus, an official “Go Global” policy provided high-liquidity financing for firms to make foreign direct investments (FDI) that increased Chinese market share abroad. Given the ugly history of neocolonial paternalism, it was

¹¹⁸ “Financial governance does not just happen in legislatures and bureaucracies. Indeed, it does not mainly happen there. When we put the technical aspects of regulatory practice at the center of the analysis, as market insiders do, we come to see that many more kinds of agents—from financiers to back-office administrative staff to ordinary retail investors, and including even computer programs and legal documents—are indispensable agents of market governance.” Annelise Riles, *Collateral Knowledge: Legal Reasoning in the Global Financial Markets* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 223–24.

¹¹⁹ Riles, 215.

¹²⁰ See Matt Ferchen, “China, Venezuela, and the Illusion of Debt-Trap Diplomacy,” *AsiaGlobal Online*, August 16, 2018.

not surprising that African stakeholders should prefer *laissez-faire* capital over aid-based loan programs. Market fundamentalists also interpreted the depoliticization of development as Africa's opportunity for recovery from centuries of trauma. Take, for example, this cover story in *The Economist*:

The first great surge of foreign interest in Africa, dubbed the “scramble”, was when 19th-century European colonists carved up the continent and seized Africans' land. The second was during the Cold War, when East and West vied for the allegiance of newly independent African states; the Soviet Union backed Marxist tyrants while America propped up despots who claimed to believe in capitalism. A third surge, now under way, is more benign. Outsiders have noticed that the continent is important and becoming more so, not least because of its growing share of the global population (by 2025 the UN predicts that there will be more Africans than Chinese people). Governments and businesses from all around the world are rushing to strengthen diplomatic, strategic and commercial ties. This creates vast opportunities. If Africa handles the new scramble wisely, the main winners will be Africans themselves.¹²¹

Like the testimony of a compassionate witness, this account casts a continent as a candidate for global redemption. Africa will finally have justice.

Human rights observers, on the other hand, have reservations about China's influence in Africa. “Local complaints of human rights abuses filed to denounce the economic predation of Chinese state-owned companies, have been brushed aside in Africa, Asia and Latin America,” warned the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) in its coverage of the 2021 UN Human Rights Council Meetings.¹²² When China was accused of persecuting ethnic and religious minorities, African countries rallied in support of the sovereignty principle against international scrutiny. Some African experts have expressed appreciation for China's policy of noninterference, renouncing the “gospel of freedom” without food.¹²³ Others have documented

¹²¹ “The New Scramble for Africa,” *The Economist*, March 7, 2019.

¹²² International Federation for Human Rights, “At UN Human Rights Council, China Manoeuvres to Ensure Its Own Impunity,” press release, March 26, 2021.

¹²³ Adaora Osondu-Oti, “China and Africa: Human Rights Perspective,” *Africa and Development* 41, no. 1 (2016): 49–80.

exploitative labor practices, environmental damage, and encroachment on rural communities.¹²⁴

In January 2021, the Chinese government agreed to cancel \$28 million in Congolese debt and pledged \$17 million in development and military support. Between the syndrome of discovery and abolition, people in Congo are still waiting for something to change. “At least the Chinese don’t pretend that they care about you,” says Claude, suggesting that doing business with the Chinese is Africans’ latest act of mimicry.

The law is a thing that is also an illusion. Because contract law is commensurate with difference, the rule of law projects a formal equality among global partners that is sourced from real inequality. This is how slavery and colonialism narratively legitimized kidnapping and conquest. The illusion of justice presupposed the reality of Africa as a blind spot of crisis, anchoring its figural representation as the collective victim of history. Yet the reality of crisis is also Article 15: the law of the street that can be arbitrated as a resource rather than a constraint. This real law works the contradiction of constant crisis, a continuous stream of ruptures that points to the possibility of the liberal state as its own nightmare. As Meister notes, believing the past was evil does not mean believing that the evil is past.¹²⁵ In an economy that thrives on crisis, mimetic crime is a sign of capitalism. “The country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future,” Marx wrote in the preface to *Capital*.¹²⁶ That image of development was sustained by the reality of its opposite and the desires of those who want justice. Yet the future arrives not as an achievement but as a dream deferred, a

¹²⁴ PremiCongo, “...you can go accuse us where you want...”: Violations of Human Rights by Chinese Mining Companies Established in Democratic Republic of Congo (Netherlands: Center for Research on Multinational Corporations (SOMO), 2018); Amnesty International, *Time to Recharge: Corporate Action and Inaction to Tackle Abuses in the Cobalt Supply Chain* (Amnesty International Ltd: London, 2017).

¹²⁵ Meister, *After Evil*, 14.

¹²⁶ Karl Marx, “Preface to the First (1867) Edition,” *Capital, Vol. 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1976), 91.

categorical imperative that participates metapragmatically in the injustice it seeks to eliminate. As Africans abandon the model that failed them, the heirs of Western civilization may see in that failure the symptom of their own desire, the gnosis that is nothing other than the noise in its system.¹²⁷ The ambivalent truth of the global economy is that the transformation of African countries into financial instruments was a sign of the future. With the decline of political legitimacy, it is the law of collateral that regulates financial markets while the lawlessness of shadow banking, the shadow economy, shadow states—and the shadow migrants that leave them—replaces “Africa” as the constituting exception of the international order.¹²⁸

The Trauma Trap

“I’ve always been an outsider,” Narcisse told me. “And I like it that way.”

We met outside a gay bar in Chicago on the last night of 2010, quite by accident. My sister was a smoker, and we were standing outside the front door when I first noticed him standing a few paces away, arguing on his cell phone in French. He communicated clearly and slowly, as though speaking with someone whose French was no better than mine. They were having a lovers’ quarrel, and Narcisse, with the high cheekbones and perfect complexion of a runway model, clearly had the upper hand. Suddenly he snapped his flip phone closed, leveled his gaze coolly in my direction, and I realized that I had been staring at him. He smiled warmly and asked my sister for a cigarette.

¹²⁷ See Fischer Black, “Noise,” *The Journal of Finance* 41, no. 3 (1986): 529–43.

¹²⁸ Bill Maurer, “Cyberspatial Sovereignties: Offshore Finance, Digital Cash, and the Limits of Liberalism,” *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies* 5, no. 2 (1998): 493–519; Taylor C. Nelms, “The Zombie Bank and the Magic of Finance,” *Journal of Cultural Economy* 5, no. 2 (2012); Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, *Theory from the South: Or, How Euro-America is Evolving Towards Africa* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2012).

Narcisse had lived in the United States for a decade and spoke English well. As I got to know him better, I noticed that his accent fluctuated depending on the situation. A native speaker of Cebaara (Senari) and Dioula, he was conversant in a number of Mande languages. He grew up in the town of Korhogo in northern Ivory Coast where he interacted with Bete and Akan people. He could understand Kru and became quite fluent in Baoulé, having lived in the capital of Yamoussoukro for two years. This served him well in Chicago. “Here, most of my African friends are Ghanaians. They are looser, more open. They don’t care about where I’m from.” When I asked him why the Ivoiriens should care, he made a face and told me to go study my African history. “I don’t want to talk about that stuff,” he said.

Côte d’Ivoire was still flush with cash and confidence when, as a tribute to his own legacy, Ivoirien president Félix Houphouët-Boigny built the capital of Yamoussoukro on the site of his ancestral village in the Baoulé heartland. In 1984, V. S. Naipaul wrote an essay describing the city as a pharaonic offering, “a glimpse of an African Africa, an Africa that—whatever the accidents of history, whatever the current manifestations of earthly glory—has always been in its own eyes complete, achieved, bursting with its own powers.”¹²⁹ With the condescension of his own racial unease, Naipaul diagnosed the excesses of postcolonial optimism as the overripe fruit of Western cultural consumption. Yet Narcisse was living evidence that Côte d’Ivoire had managed to stage a unique moment of African hybridity for at least a generation. Houphouët-Boigny’s gambit following independence had been to launch a capitalist state that promoted commercial farming for export and welcomed imports. Throughout the 1970s, this trade-and-investment economic strategy created the conditions for a self-conscious cosmopolitanism that fostered aesthetic experimentation, especially in Abidjan. By the mid-1990s, however, when

¹²⁹ V. S. Naipaul, “The Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro,” *The New Yorker*, May 14, 1984, 53.

Narcisse lived in Yamoussoukro, the city's primary attractions were its man-eating crocodiles and a scattering of architectural monuments to the future that were losing their battle with the bush. I wondered why Narcisse would have chosen this strange city over the bright lights and glamour of Abidjan.

Narcisse replied obliquely: "I'm a chameleon! That's the best policy for a 'man' like me." While identifying as transgender, he preferred gendered pronouns to the plural "they." "When I'm a man, call me 'he' and when I'm a woman call me 'she'." Narcisse told me the night we met that he had chosen his own name, but it took many more months before I could begin to decode his messages.

Narcisse suffered for what he called his narcissism. His mother had grown up in a Senufo family that was fond of its animist traditions. His father, a prosperous Dioula merchant, was a Muslim who never tired of pointing out that his fourth son was the wrong kind of boy. "You're the prettiest girl in the house!" his older sisters would taunt their youngest brother, and Narcisse considered it a compliment. When they weren't around, he would try on their wigs and use their makeup. "How I wanted to be a girl in those days!" he exclaimed. "I didn't have anything in common with my brothers. They liked to beat me in *futbol* or wrestling, or just beat me up, so I would go with my sisters, and they would dress me up like I was their doll."

The consequences for being different magnified as Narcisse grew older. When he was eight, he was directed to take up a sport; when he turned ten, he was ordered to stop sleeping in the girls' room. When he was thirteen, having refused to comply consistently with either of these mandates, he was taken out of *l'enseignement secondaire* and sent to live at a Koranic school. "I was so smart," he says mournfully, "that I was promoted ahead of my older brother. He hated me for it. He hated that I inherited all the brains and all the beauty."

“And what was the Koranic school like?”

“You don’t want to know. We had to recite the Koran all day and night, and there wasn’t a single mirror in the house. Just imagine!” His laughter seemed forced. “Buona was no place for me. I missed my mother. I missed my sisters. I still do.” He checked his phone and stood up, kissing us on both cheeks in the French style. “To be continued . . .,” he promised, and he was true to his word. Narcisse did not favor the narrative form, however. He preferred to share disjointed anecdotes, lingering on vivid images and character descriptions while omitting key plot points. He resisted my attempts to conduct a formal interview, and it would take two years for me to stitch the parts together into a form that he found acceptable.

I gleaned much of the supplementary information for this story from a cousin, Karim, whom I met at a party hosted by the Ivory Coast Community Association in October 2011. I had attended the event with Amina, and Narcisse and I were surprised to see each other there: it was the only time I saw him in *la mode traditionnelle*, as he called it. He exhibited a more subdued personal style that, like his modest gold bubu, could be put away when he got home. Indeed, in that setting Karim seemed more outgoing than his chameleon cousin, now called Sekou.¹³⁰ They seemed familiar and playful, but also slightly confrontational with each other. Theirs was a joking relationship that construed Sekou as the stranger and Karim as the host.¹³¹ For example, Karim, who had recently lost his home to foreclosure, giped that his cousin would have to take his place as husband and father while he started a new business in Côte d’Ivoire. Narcisse, the gender arbitrageur, responded that he would never be able to fill Karim’s shoes, a subtle

¹³⁰ Though Karim consistently referred to his cousin as Sekou, I will continue to refer to him by his preferred name, Narcisse.

¹³¹ Robert Launay, “Practical Joking,” *Cahiers d’Etudes Africaines* 46, no. 184 (2006): 799; and “Landlords, Hosts, and Strangers among the Dyula,” *Ethnology* 18, no. 1 (1979): 71–83.

reference, perhaps, to his unwillingness to marry and have children of his own. Karim, the commodity arbitrageur, spoke bluntly about the detrimental effects of the 2008 Recession on his business prospects with the genial demeanor of an experienced *commerçant*. With Narcisse's blessing, I would meet with him several times over the next few months to talk about his experiences and plans for the future.

Karim had always been a migrant. His Dioula family moved south from a village near the Burkina Faso border in the early 1970s in response to the president's far flung invitation to farm fertile land near the coast. "There weren't really even borders then," he told me. "You were just from the north, and that was fine. They wanted us there so much that they gave us land! You hear people talk about 'the Ivorian miracle'? Well, *we* were their miracle." Karim had little formal education, but he knew his country's colonial history. A relative latecomer to the French colonial collection of territories, Ivory Coast did not figure as a hub for European trade until French engineers completed Abidjan's deepwater harbor in 1951. By 1960 the surrounding forests were cultivated with cocoa, coffee, rubber, bananas, pineapples, palm oil, and coconuts, and the colony had replaced Senegal as France's most profitable West African possession. This labor-intensive success story required a generous supply of workers. The president's policy of granting land to "*les étrangers*" from the largely Muslim north was the lynchpin of his strategy to transform a subsistence economy into an export market of cash-cropping smallholders within a generation. Thus, not unlike the United States, Cote d'Ivoire became the powerhouse of the region because it hosted its migrants.

After generations as petty traders in the north, Karim's family found work as wage laborers on a small cocoa farm in the southwest. A few years later they bought the property. The patronage relations underpinning these transactions have been described as a debt logic that

governed the shift from lineage-based land tenure to individual property rights.¹³² A robust international demand for agricultural commodities allowed sharecroppers to meet their obligations and acquire inexpensive tracts of their own while native landholders invested profits and rents in urban businesses. As in many African countries, the “politics of the belly” (called *Houphouëtism*) enriched of the president’s client network through high-modern infrastructure projects that mired future generations in odious debt.¹³³ Unlike Mobutu, however, who sought personal control over every aspect of Zairian life, Houphouët-Boigny built his state apparatus on a market model that invited international actors at both the top and the bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy. Until the late 1970s, Côte d’Ivoire was celebrated as Africa’s postcolonial success story, drawing attention from experts and financiers eager to profit from the latest surge of risky investment.¹³⁴ Historian Abou Bamba describes the “developmentalist ethos” of his country as the articulation of multiple temporalities, bringing together the European Enlightenment agenda of rational exploitation, the American geopolitical mobilization of finance against communism, and the micropolitics of local actors through patronage networks.¹³⁵ For

¹³² See Robert M. Hecht, “Immigration, Land Transfer and Tenure Changes in Divo, Ivory Coast, 1940-80,” *Africa* 55, no. 3 (1985): 319–36; and Armando Cutolo, “Modernity, Autochthony and the Ivorian Nation: The End of a Century in Côte d’Ivoire,” *Africa* 80 (2010): 527–52.

¹³³ The term “odious debt” was coined in 1927 by Russian émigré Alexander Sack to refer to sovereign debt incurred without the consent of the people, nor for their benefit. See Odette Lienau, *Rethinking Sovereign Debt: Politics, Reputation, and Legitimacy in Modern Finance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014). In Zaire, the Maluku steel mill, the Inga-Shaba power line, and the Tenke-Fungurume copper mines were spectacular disasters. In Côte d’Ivoire, the expansion of sugar production in the savanna, dam construction on the Bandama river, and an ambitious plan of state-led educational television each backfired in ways that exposed the limitations of “seeing like a state.” Abou B. Bamba, *African Miracle, African Mirage: Transnational Politics and the Paradox of Modernization in Ivory Coast* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2016). On the hubris of state planning, see James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

¹³⁴ For a world systems theory analysis of Côte d’Ivoire’s abrupt change of fortune, See Karen A. Mingst, “Ivory Coast at the Semi-Periphery of the World-Economy,” *International Studies Quarterly* 32, no. 3 (1988): 259–74.

¹³⁵ Bamba, *African Miracle*, 16.

more than two decades, the Ivorian government leveraged international prestige and a utilitarian strain of Pan-African diplomacy into spectacular wealth for foreign investors and Ivorian elites.

Karim came of age during the brutal decline of this postcolonial prosperity. His country shared the fate of its neighbors following the OPEC embargo of 1973, which inflated energy prices, decelerated global production, and gutted the market for raw materials. Houphouët-Boigny was able to keep spending by relying on privileged access to capital, going so far as to negotiate financing for a second major dam on the Bandama. Côte d'Ivoire's outstanding debts rose from \$400 million to almost \$4 billion by the end of the decade, and while France and the World Bank were the country's key creditors, the president increasingly turned to American commercial banks, which were looking for ways to recycle petrodollars.¹³⁶ By 1978 the debt logic of his entrepreneurial state had also shifted on the ground, when drought and an invasion of locusts forced the government to import rice in order to feed its people. Rural farmers smuggled their cocoa and coffee into neighboring countries where prices were better, while urban unemployment skyrocketed. As the standard of living deteriorated, migrants from the north became convenient scapegoats. Houphouët-Boigny's political opponents exploited these tensions, inciting violence towards Muslims like Karim's family, who were considered *allogènes* wherever they were born.

"When *Le Vieux* died," recalled Karim, "everything went bad. People came from the city and told us that our land was theirs, and they threatened to burn our house down if we didn't

¹³⁶ In 1977, Ivory Coast received a \$140 million American-sourced "jumbo loan" ... "the biggest-ever lump sum credit to a single country in Africa by commercial banks." Citibank's exposure approached 10 percent of the total Ivorian external debt. Bamba, *African Miracle*, 180–81. The availability of private credit was due in no small part to the urgency for counter-inflationary investments caused by petrodollar recycling. This problem would be shifted from investors to debtors when Paul Volcker raised interest rates in 1979. See David E. Spiro, *The Hidden Hand*.

leave. There was nothing we could do. We had to start all over again in the city.” The battle for succession following Houphouët-Boigny’s death in 1993 dramatized the pitfalls of multi-party democracy in countries where established networks of redistribution were abruptly fractured by crisis.¹³⁷ In many African countries, the political liberalization of the 1990s encouraged autochthony, an extreme nationalism restricting membership to groups with the indigenous claim to be “born from the earth itself.”¹³⁸ Unlike in the DRC where *Zairianization* operated as a unifying ideology of state control, *Ivoirité* divided the nation in two. From his ethnic enclave of Abobo, Karim witnessed brutal struggles over ownership of the country’s faded future. The politically-dominant Kwa—which include Houphouët-Boigny’s Akan-Baoulé—traced a genealogy from the Ashanti kingdoms of Ghana and even beyond, to ancient Egypt. The predominantly Muslim north, on the other hand, while rural and comparatively poor, has been a site of political contestation since the anti-colonial resistance movements of the mid-nineteenth century.

Competing cosmologies were entangled with contestation over citizenship, generating suspicion on all sides. Under Henri Konan Bédié, Houphouët-Boigny’s successor, the xenophobic discourse of *l’ivorité* translated into discriminatory policies and violence against northerners by government forces. In response, presidential contender Alassane Ouattara, a high-

¹³⁷ On the ironies of democratic transition in Africa, see Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, “Figuring Democracy: An Anthropological Take on African Political Modernities,” in *Theory from the South: Or, How Euro-America is Evolving Towards Africa* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2012); and Achille Mbembe, “On Private Indirect Government,” in *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

¹³⁸ See Peter Geschiere, *The Perils of Belonging: Autochthony, Citizenship, and Exclusion in Africa and Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); and Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, “Naturing the Nation: Aliens, Apocalypse, and the Postcolonial State,” *Social Identities* 7, no. 2 (2001): 233–65.

level official with the IMF, appealed to the international community on behalf of his Muslim political base.

“My great-great-grandfather fought with Samori Touré,” Karim informed me. “Do you know who he was? He was the greatest freedom fighter in the history of our country, the founder of the Wassoulou Empire. The Europeans couldn’t get past the coast until they put him down. Now I’m a foreigner in my own country. Some people tell me I’m lying, that I’m not even Ivoirian. They told me I was a terrorist because I’m a Muslim. They won’t say that to *you*, maybe, because they want you to think they’re tolerant. *Mais ils se remplissent* [they’re filling up], let me tell you. I’ve heard them blame the war on Muslim *juju*, when they’re the ones calling on Satan in the name of God. They call themselves Christians but they use bad magic, even in this country. You have to watch out for them.”

During my fieldwork, friends of all religions warned me to beware of bad magic. Even informants with advanced degrees suggested that mysterious forces operating in my life gained power from my disbelief. “Satan doesn’t want you to know he’s watching you,” my Mouride friends liked to say. “Better safe than sorry,” Amina explained, when we took Modibo to a Serer healer in Senegal. Modibo did not resist and claimed after the ritual that he felt less rebellious. “Anxiety is a bad spirit,” counseled Martine. “To overcome it, you’ve got to pray.” She was a Catholic from Benin who had begun attending Pentecostal services. Olivia was a Protestant from Cameroon who found inexplicable comfort in a nearby Catholic church. “You don’t play around with that kind of thing,” she told me. “The bad *juju* in this country, it eats me alive.”

The spread of consumer capitalism has not deterred fear of the supernatural among Africans. On the contrary, the link between eating and sorcery, through which power is extracted

from another, remains a prevalent trope in anthropology.¹³⁹ For centuries, charismatic Christians and Sufi marabouts have offered protection from evil set loose by the displacements of colonialism, the depredations of neocolonial regimes, and the brutality of war. Max Weber diagnosed the spirit of capitalism as an existential fear that was sublimated as the drive for profit.¹⁴⁰ But Weber's story, like Auerbach's, was woven with the threads of a particular time and place. Perhaps occult economies make more sense on the ambivalent ground of contemporary Africa. While the faithful readily admit their powerlessness before God, those who turned to history for answers and politics for redress are not necessarily empowered by their search for understanding. "The genius of the new holistic faiths," write Jean Comaroff, "is to address the displacements and desires of the current world, to make its pathologies and terrors the portents of imminent transcendence."¹⁴¹ Comaroff sees the global resurgence of charismatic religion as the re-enchantment of a derationalizing world, arguing that Weber was, perhaps, too hasty in dismissing the compatibility of magical thinking and the spirit of capitalism.

Weber approached the Protestant Reformation as a paradox: the external law of the church is replaced by the internal discipline of doubt. Most religious traditions, he argues, are projections of human consciousness in the form of a moral community. According to the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, however, grace cannot be earned or experienced; it is the free gift of a transcendent God who is all-knowing but unknown. With the withdrawal of magic

¹³⁹ E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1976); Peter Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). Jean Comaroff, "Consuming Passions: Child Abuse, Fetishism, and 'The New World Order,'" *Culture* 17, no. 1-2 (1997): 7-25.

¹⁴⁰ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. T. Parsons (London: Routledge, 2005).

¹⁴¹ Jean Comaroff, "The Politics of Conviction: Faith on the Neo-liberal Frontier," *Social Analysis* 53, no. 1 (2009): 33. Also see Ruth Marshall, "Christianity, Anthropology, Politics," *Current Anthropology* 55, no. 10 (2014): S344-S356.

from the world, desire has no effect on the future. Nevertheless, prosperity may be retrospectively interpreted as a sign of selection. Thus, submission to God's will is an irrational commitment to an uncertain outcome, requiring a "leap of faith" that redemption will have been deserved.¹⁴² Unlike rational choice, which conceives of action prospectively as a means to an end, this counterfactual interpretation of the past from the future permits the believer to exercise free will while remaining powerless over the outcome.¹⁴³ In other words, the reward for a frugal and hardworking lifestyle is not the byproduct of wealth, but the certainty that God is in charge.

Weber explains modernization not as the inevitable result of instrumental reason but as the internalization of trust in God as a personal value-orientation. The iron cage is not law but duty as objectified in property. Severed from traditional relations of imminent trust, both worker and capitalist strive to accumulate as much wealth as possible as an end in itself, neither a means for pleasure as a commodity nor power over another as a gift. The anticipated rapture becomes a disenchanted cult of growth promising to realize worldly justice on a global scale. Personally, faith in capitalism promises the reward of self-sovereignty in the figure of the bourgeois subject who owns and masters the self through domination of the material world. "No one knows who will live in this cage in the future," Weber concludes, "or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals, or, if neither, mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance."¹⁴⁴

Was the explosion of charismatic faith among Africans a rebirth of old ideas or the sign of something new? This is a trick question, since every repetition is also new. More relevant is

¹⁴² Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 53

¹⁴³ Dupuy, *The Mark of the Sacred*, 20.

¹⁴⁴ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 124.

the question of whether Weber's tale even applies to Africa. Taking seriously the notion of individual personhood and its dialectical relation to the autonomous self brings into question Weber's central concept of subjectivity. For many scholars, the subject emerged in response to René Descartes's assertion that "I think therefore I am" is the only ground of certainty in an epistemologically uncertain world. Until that time, a human being was constituted by God who, in the Christian tradition, had abandoned the world pending the resurrection. The core of the Western subject, therefore, was the empty container of a soul that was filled by a spiritual practice of faith and a belief in salvation. Early modern theologians, scientists, and philosophers were acutely aware that while Descartes's conviction derived from the fervor of divine knowledge, positing the self as the basis of certainty created a possibility for uncertainty by performing an existential independence that removed God from the picture. Blaise Pascal expressed this problem as a wager, like the flip of a coin, that determined the absolutely unknowable question of whether God exists in the life of each and every person. In this way, these Catholic thinkers acknowledged the theological basis of John Calvin's doctrine of predestination, which denied the faithful any ground for belief in personal salvation. The self-referential paradox of scientific thought, as articulated by the Calvinists, forced the believer to skip the scale of abstraction by observing the self as "subject to" God in a relation that exceeds human knowledge. Descartes's intuitive belief in God, on the other hand, led him to skip the scale by observing the self as "subject of" an external world without surrendering his belief in his capacity to know himself. Modern thought has vacillated between these positions ever since.

The modern subject is the legacy of this existential problematic. "Secularity is always a secondary concept," writes Meister, "defined by whatever element of the sacred is absent from it, and by how that element of sacredness would be conceived." For nonbelievers, justice replaces

God as the intertemporal problem of how to value life on earth. While Kant avoided the question by positing transcendental reason as a timeless *a priori* category, Hegel put the “work of the negative” at the center of a contradiction that cannot resolve itself due to the movement of time. Weber’s spirit of capitalism as well as Marx’s surplus value and Freud’s repression each theorize the theological unconscious as an ambivalent source of value that is also a trap. The loss of God was converted into a material resource once labor time was realized as the value of real things like commodities and money. It was converted into a psychic resource as trauma, the cut of foreclosure from dividuality internalized as an infinite loss. Capitalism has demanded a high price for individuality, literally speaking, insofar as the ethical activity of gift exchange is replaced by an instantaneous monetary transaction. Brian Rotman dramatizes this point with reference to Shakespeare’s *King Lear*:

A world under threat, within which love takes place through lived action; it recreates itself through obligations, duties, promises, and contracts of nurture. Such love is produced, and has meaning only *in situ*, in the context of its production. Lear’s transaction, by arithmetising it, by forcefully inserting into it a system of mercantile exchange and making it an object of deals, replaces this produced love, the continuous result of a lived practice, which is how Cordelia conceives it, by love neutralized into a *commodity*, an item within a system of measurable values. And in doing so rapes it.¹⁴⁵

If personhood is the negotiation of dividual and individual aspects of self, changes in the social conditions of knowledge and practice can have a profound impact on how we perceive our capacity for action. Indeed, I am convinced by Bill Maurer’s argument that the emergence of financial derivatives, prices traded independently of their assets, indicates a “traumatic separation of words from things” that resurfaces the theological kernel of Western thought.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵ Brian Rotman, *Signifying Nothing: The Semiotics of Zero* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), 80–81.

¹⁴⁶ Bill Maurer, “Repressed Futures: Financial Derivatives’ Theological Unconscious,” *Economy and Society* 31, no. 1 (2002): 15–36.

The current moment of self-reference in which the believers in positive science observe themselves observing the world may actually dissolve the unity of the subject as an autonomous self-observer.

Many Africans growing up during postcolonial transformation experienced the fluctuations of global capital as a traumatic break with a *habitus* of hybridity. Karim describes his family's forced displacement as a hard lesson in distrust. "You couldn't forget what side you were on. When we got to the city, my father started bringing me to the mosque. I was already a teenager before I realized that Allah matters." Narcisse left Korhogo during a period of Muslim revitalization in the north. Indeed, his conflict with his father may have reflected growing tension between his parents with respect to his mother's animist background. Karim shared his side of the story: "My mother is my cousin's father's oldest sister. After Sekou ran home from the Madrassa the second time, my mother told my uncle to send him to live with us in Abidjan. We always had relatives passing through our house. Two of his brothers had already come. But Sekou wouldn't do it. He preferred his mother's people." Karim described his cousin, not unkindly, as a *fils a maman* who refused to grow up, a risky characteristic in a *gen du nord*. His depiction may have reflected Muslim stereotypes of the largely animist Senufo as superstitious and parochial.¹⁴⁷ Perhaps he was also implying that non-heteronormative behaviors are a kind of child's play that becomes less tolerable with age.¹⁴⁸ He spoke of his cousin with the forbearance

¹⁴⁷ While the Dioula warrior king Samori Touré built the Islamic Wassoulou empire—encompassing present-day Guinea, Mali, Sierra Leone and northern Côte d'Ivoire—to be defeated by the French in a blaze of glory, the Senufo chief Peleforo Soro effectively brokered colonial interests to keep his region out of the fray. Robert Launay, "Stereotypic Vision: The 'Moral Character' of the Senufo in Colonial and Postcolonial Discourse," *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines* 39, no. 54 (1999): 271–92. On Dioula attitudes towards animist religious beliefs, see Marie Miran-Guyon, "'Native' Conversion to Islam in Southern Côte d'Ivoire: The Perils of Double Identity," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 42, no. 2 (2012): 95–117.

¹⁴⁸ On the association of gender-crossing and homoeroticism with immaturity, see E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1976), 236–39; Nil

of an older brother, though they had never actually met in their country of origin. He did not acknowledge Sekou's double life, though this may have reflected our mutual discretion. When I asked Narcisse about this, he shrugged his shoulders. "I have nothing to hide," he said. "But people see what they want to see."

What Karim diagnosed as a dangerous affectation became an effective survival strategy for Narcisse. When his father threatened to send him to another madrasa, he took matters into his own hands, joining his mother's sister in Yamassoukro. It was a place where he could distance himself from his Dioula background in a way that would have been impossible in ethnically polarized Abidjan. Narcisse's maternal aunt was Sandobele, a diviner who wished to recruit him into the exclusive women's society of Sandogo. "She told me I was special in ways that my father's people couldn't understand," Narcisse recalled. "In the capital, nobody could tell *where* I was from. I kept them on their toes, and that's how I learned to take care of myself." As he would soon discover, it was also a fertile milieu for *branchés*, a coded term used by sexual and gender minorities to describe themselves and each other.¹⁴⁹ Matthew Thomann's ethnography explores subtle ambiguities of classification, couched in an argot known as *woubican*, that distinguished *woubis*—boys "who play the role of the woman" but "remain boys and who love men"; *travesties*—"someone who dresses as a woman" and "transforms herself"; and *yossis*—"boys who 'keep their role' and 'behave like boys,'" sleeping with men, women, and

Ajen, "West African Homoeroticism: West African Men Who Have Sex with Men," in *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies in African Homosexualities*, ed. S.O. Murray and W. Roscoe (New York: Palgrave, 1998); and Rudolf Pell Gaudio, *Allah Made Us: Sexual Outlaws in an Islamic African City* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

¹⁴⁹ Matthew Thomann, *The Price of Inclusion: Sexual Subjectivity, Violence, and the Nonprofit Industrial Complex in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire* (PhD diss., American University, 2014), 72–104, 160.

travestis.¹⁵⁰ These forms of identification appear to replicate the gender binary, yet each are interpreted with variations that encompass a range of gender practices. Indeed, as Thomann points out, the evidence-based interventions of the “nonprofit industrial complex,” powered by an opaque model of gender and sexuality that replicates itself without reflection, exacerbated the exclusion of *travestis* from support and advocacy organizations dominated by relatively more circumspect *woubis*.¹⁵¹

Narcisse never doubted that he was a *travesti*, though it would take some time for him to find his way into the name. “I was only fourteen and I was all by myself,” he told me. “I was my own best friend.” His aunt helped him get a job at a friend’s drugstore. “I bought my first dress with my first paycheck. Peacock-blue sateen with a C-cup bra.” This is a precious memory for Narcisse, and he describes in great detail how he perused the city’s many markets, comparing the prices, textures, colors, and quality of wigs, stockings, and shoes. “I’d tell them I was shopping for my twin sister who was exactly the same size, and they had a ball dressing me up! They’d all come over from the different shops to give their opinion. They got so excited, laughing just a little bit too loud. And that’s when I really began to appreciate how hypocritical men can be, how they always want whatever they’re not supposed to want.”

He would probably have spent all of his money on fashion and magazines if he weren’t sleeping on his aunt’s couch. With a dozen people watching his every movement, however, there was nowhere to try on or even store his treasures. It took six months to plan his great escape to the other side of town. “I told my aunt I was sending money home, and I saved up a deposit for a

¹⁵⁰ Thomann and Corey-Boulet, “Violence, Exclusion and Resilience among Ivoirian Travestis,” *Critical African Studies* 9, no. 1 (2017): 106–23.

¹⁵¹ Matthew Thomann, “HIV Vulnerability and the Erasure of Sexual and Gender Diversity in Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire,” *Global Public Health* 11, nos. 7-8 (2016): 994–1009.

private room. She didn't get along with my mother, so I was hoping she wouldn't find out the truth. She was an old witch, *ma tante*," he said affectionately. "She never wanted to let me leave." Narcisse moved to a very different neighborhood where there were more girls and even some boys "strolling" in short skirts. That is when he got bold and started going out like a woman. Narcisse lingered over his account of sexual awakening with deliberation, as though sharing a precious gift. He also described the stages of psychological preparation that brought him to that point. "Back then, I believed that the only way I could be myself was to walk away from everyone in my old life. I had to be reborn and throw away my old skin. It was my revolution."

This life, made possible by Houphouët-Boigny's promotion of consumer capitalism, flourished in those parts of the country that were hardest hit by the austerities of structural adjustment. Thus, even as Côte d'Ivoire enjoyed Africa's most unfettered public sphere, anxieties about national sovereignty and social reproduction, which linked economic stagnation to homosexuality, were feeding a dual backlash against northerners in the south and "sexual deviants" in the north.¹⁵² By the time Narcisse reached the "Gay El Dorado" of Abidjan in 1998, stigma against *branchés* among Muslims prevented communication with his relatives, while stigma against northern *travestis* among homonationalists led him to refashion himself as a *woubi* of indeterminate origins.¹⁵³ Narcisse's efforts to navigate this double bind led straight to

¹⁵² Marc Le Pape and Claudine Vidal, "Libéralisme et vécus sexuels a Abidjan," *Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie* 76 (1984): 111–18.

¹⁵³ Thomann describes this awkward position of northern *branchés* in some detail: "*Branchés* who come from the northern regions of Côte d'Ivoire, who are Muslim or were raised in Muslim families, and/or who have a sub-standard level of education found it difficult to fit into the new milieus that have emerged around NGOs like Claver's Alternative. This raises questions about the extent to which *branchés* from northern neighborhoods and/or backgrounds are served by the nonprofit industrial complex in Abidjan. Stigma within the community has resulted in low participation from *branchés* living in Abidjan's northern neighborhoods, as well as a rift between *branchés* in communities like the northern Ivoirian and

sex work and a few sordid misadventures that he would rather not recall. Then he met a man named Fortune.

“That can’t *really* have been his name,” I said.

“It might as well have been,” Narcisse smiled. His special someone was a wealthy Ivorian financier who managed investments in “emerging markets” throughout West Africa. Narcisse spoke of him affectionately as a cultivated man, a mentor who would only speak to him in French. “I called him Fortune, he called me his ‘Narcisse,’ and I kept the name in his honor. And because he knew me best of any person in this world.” Fortune invited Narcisse to share his well-appointed apartment overlooking the sea, found him a job waiting tables at a posh restaurant in the embassy district, and modeled certain habits of European refinement that would serve his protégé well in New York and Chicago. Though Fortune spent much of his time with his wife and children in France, he called weekly and brought books and recordings during his frequent trips home. “He wanted me to know all the ways Africa influenced art and music in the West. He was passionate about these things. He wanted me to be an educated man.” Narcisse welcomed these lessons so voraciously that Fortune paid a university student to tutor him in history and French. Fortune also discouraged Narcisse from gender-switching. “It made me angry then. Now I know it was because he was afraid for my life.”

Fortune wanted to send Narcisse to university in France, but like most of his generation, Narcisse wanted to go to the United States. “I told him that we could go together and set up house and live like we were married, but he told me I was crazy. I knew the truth. He had it all.

Muslim-dominated neighborhood of Abobo and those residing in neighborhoods that NGO activists and peer educators deemed ‘gay friendly.’” Thomann, *The Price of Inclusion*, 43–44. On Senufo strategies to obscure Dioula influences through renaming, see Juliette Carle, “Quand La Crise Influe Sur Les Pratiques Nominales: Les changements de nom chez les Senufo de Côte d’Ivoire,” *Politique Africaine* 95 (2004): 169–83.

He didn't want to let me go, but he also wasn't going to give up his French life for me." The choice of emigration to the United States over France was a prominent theme among my informants. For two decades following independence, Africa's nascent middle class was inspired by "the old mythologies of modernity," idealizing a university education and government career as the vehicle of status and upward mobility.¹⁵⁴ Schools promoted talented students from rural areas for scholarships, which carried some as far as the postcolonial metropole where they could be expected to acquire an appreciation for European style and substance. African cities were embellished with monumental projects that reflected the confidence of new African states, flush with Cold War cash and the energy and optimism of a new intelligentsia. However, the global debt crisis put an abrupt end to decades of investment in higher education. Structural adjustment reoriented funds towards primary and secondary education throughout Africa, fueling demand for enrollment in deteriorating universities.¹⁵⁵ At the same time, mandated curtailment of the public sector eliminated the civil service jobs that had promised achievement for a generation of post-independence *evolués*.

Cameroonian anthropologist Basile Ndjio describes how this shift in opportunity structures transformed the social imaginary of aspiration from politico-bureaucratic to financial elites. "When the relative prosperity of the local economy placed the postcolonial state at the centre of the production and distribution of wealth, families dreamt of having their own *haut*

¹⁵⁴ Basile Ndjio, "Evolués & Feymen: Old and New Figures of Modernity in Cameroon," in *Readings in Modernity in Africa*, ed. Peter Geschiere et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 205–13.

¹⁵⁵ See N'dri T. Assié-Lumumba, *Higher Education in Africa: Crises, Reforms and Transformation* (CODESRIA Working Paper, Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa, Dakar, Senegal, 2006); William S. Saint, *Universities in Africa: Strategies for Stabilization and Revitalization*. (World Bank Technical Paper No. 194, Africa Technical Department Series, 1992); and Nancy C. Alexander, "Paying for Education: How the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund Influence Education in Developing Countries," *Peabody Journal of Education* 76, nos. 3-4 (2001): 285–338.

fonctionnaire who could make the state resources flow towards them,” he writes.¹⁵⁶ For the generation to follow, it became increasingly evident that such an investment in professional success, characterized by polymath expertise in Western history and African culture, brought diminishing returns. Turning away from the “fallen idols” of postcolonial mimicry, young people in Cameroon emulated entrepreneurial figures called *feymen*: traders, hustlers, pop stars, and religious leaders who, as market makers, arbitrated disparities in access to wealth, commodities, information, and above all, style, the reflection of their success.

Like *feymen*, Narcisse practiced arbitrage as a mode of self-understanding. In his ethnography of Abidjan youth culture conducted a year after Narcisse’s emigration, Sasha Newell calls this reflexivity “the modernity bluff”: “a demonstration of the superior person one would embody all the time if one had the money for it, a display of potential.”¹⁵⁷ Drawing on Bhaba’s approach to mimicry as counter-performance mimesis, Newell illustrates how *bluffeurs* enact belonging in a volatile context by imitating modernity as promise and failure. Following Durkheim, classic studies of ritual legitimate social norms by actively reproducing the inclusion of members within a social whole.¹⁵⁸ By wearing a mask—literally or figuratively—while reflexively executing certain words and gestures, the participant bears a risk that is registered as a mark on the body or in the form of a fetish-contract. When the ritual works, membership is experienced without self-alienation. However, when crisis ruptures the mimetic repetition of everyday rituals, iconic models appear as counterfeit, the failure to represent.

¹⁵⁶ Ndiyo, “Evolués & Feymen,” 208.

¹⁵⁷ Sasha Newell, *The Modernity Bluff: Crime, Consumption, and Citizenship in Côte d’Ivoire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 1.

¹⁵⁸ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995). For a semiotic reassessment of ritual theory in anthropology see Roy Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

Hence *feymen* and *bluffeurs* orchestrated a counter-cultural performance that appropriated the signs of a hegemonic order as a politics of identity. If Bourdieu's notion of "distinction" expresses a form of cultural capital that indexes class privilege, high fashion in the post-colony indicates not only the inaccessibility of that privilege but also its hypocrisy.¹⁵⁹ Newell describes how money was converted through public acts of performative consumption into another "sphere of exchange" in which circulating counterfeits secured social networks while subverting the symbolic capital of the political elite. Brand names lose market share to knockoffs, which affirm their prestige while undermining their profits. Thieves become role models and gang leaders become heroes in the law of the street that the Congolese call Article 15. Though his informants were explicitly heteronormative in their games of sexual conquest, Newell treats their "Veblenesque conspicuous consumption of name brand sportswear and other prestige goods," "potlatch-style destruction of wealth," and "performance of embodied gender" as a kind of drag, a ritual of counterfeit which, following Judith Butler, exposes the myth of authenticity.¹⁶⁰

Along these lines, the performance of queer consciousness becomes an emancipatory possibility with the expansion of consumer capitalism. The influence of commodification—past, present, and future—on African culture is controversial, as indicated by the furor surrounding Achille Mbembe's use of the term "Afropolitanism." Emphasizing flux and hybridity over the nationalist concern with origins, it has become synonymous with the slick transnational aesthetic of "Africa Rising."¹⁶¹ Yet Africa's entanglement with global capital is as old as modernity itself,

¹⁵⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

¹⁶⁰ Newell, *The Modernity Bluff*, 138–42. Also see Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519–31.

¹⁶¹ Achille Mbembe, "Afropolitanism," in *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent*, ed. N. Simon and L. Durán (Johannesburg: Johannesburg Art Gallery, 2007), 26–29. For a summary of debates that

and African cities have been permeated by Euro-American consumer culture since the colonial period. According to Babacar M'Baye, interracial, homosexual, and transgender sexualities have flourished in Dakar since the nineteenth century, becoming a visible aspect of the city's reputation as "the Paris of Africa" in the 1950s.¹⁶² The cosmopolitanism of colonial metropolises was an extension of the wealth being stolen from Africans and then reflected back at them as an image originating abroad. Following independence, former colonial powers held onto their influence by flooding post-colonies with manufactured goods, achieving more cultural penetration through commodification than they ever achieved by direct rule. In response, many leaders attempted to manage the desires of their new nations. Thus, the same logic behind Mobutu's Zairianization promoted nationalist homophobia in the form of "an idealized heterosexual African subject" that Njido names Muntu.¹⁶³

During my fieldwork, an Afrocentric resistance to global capitalism was often accompanied by a cultural conservatism that rejected forms of self-expression—such as queer sexual practices and feminism—associated with the West. Indeed, homophobia was becoming a potent form of symbolic capital in African politics in ways that paralleled the eruption of witchcraft allegations.¹⁶⁴ I can only speculate on the link between these developments and the surge of foreign capital that accompanied China's demand for African oil. What is clear,

have unfolded around this term, see the collection of essays in *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 28, no. 1 (2016): 61–126.

¹⁶² Babacar M'Baye, "Afropolitan Sexual and Gender Identities in Colonial Senegal," *Humanities* 8 (2019): 166.

¹⁶³ Basile Ndiyo, "Post-colonial Histories of Sexuality: The Political Invention of a Libidinal African Straight," *Africa* 82, no. 4 (2012): 609–31.

¹⁶⁴ Patrick Awondo et al., "Homophobic Africa? Toward A More Nuanced View," *African Studies Review* 55, no. 3 (2012): 145–68. On the subordination of women in African oral tradition, see Alemu, "Oral Narrative as Ideological Weapon." In Chapter 2, I discuss the effect of migration on gender roles among African migrants to the United States.

however, is that queer subcultures emerged in the double bind between modernization and the “sexual governmentality” of postcolonial states.¹⁶⁵ At the height of *Mubutisme*, Congolese *sapeurs* created an androgynous utopia only attainable within the enchanted space of the club, where the freedom to pursue one’s personal pleasure was the only law.¹⁶⁶ Resonating with Congolese music—a wellspring of self-conscious urbanity throughout Africa—*La Sape* also implies a diasporic sensibility that remains attuned to the local, with all its subtle shifts of circumstance.¹⁶⁷

This is why, more likely than not, the improvisations of *feymen*, *bluffers*, and *la sape* all entailed international mobility, whether temporary or long-term, forced or voluntary. Newell describes migration as a resource for social reproduction not merely in economic terms but also as symbolic currency within a speculative moral economy.¹⁶⁸ Euro-American modernity has always been a bluff, he points out, insofar as it has required an audience, a fictive outsider who is the projection of the performer’s desire. The ambivalence between having and being, desiring and desiring to be desired, is intrinsic to the logic of the fetish, an animated object that expresses the self in relation to others. As William Pietz argues, wanting what you are not is a libidinal and

¹⁶⁵ Ndiyo, “Post-colonial Histories of Sexuality,” 624. On the double bind, see Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, 206–12.

¹⁶⁶ Justin-Daniel Gandoulou, *Entre Paris et Bacongo* (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 1984). Also see Jonathan Friedman, “The Political Economy of Elegance: An African Cult of Beauty,” in *Consumption and Identity*, ed. Jonathan Friedman (London: Routledge, 1995); Didier Gondola, “Dream and Drama: The Search for Elegance among Congolese Youth,” *African Studies Review* 42, no. 1 (1999): 23–48; and Janet MacGaffey and Remy Bazenguissa-Ganga, *Congo-Paris: Transnational Traders on the Margins of the Law* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

¹⁶⁷ See Rene Devisch, “Frenzy and Renewal,” 619–23; Joseph Trapido, “Love and Money in Kinoin Popular Music,” *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 22, no. 2 (2010): 121–44; and Susan Orlean, “The Congo Sound,” *New Yorker*, October 14, 2002. In *The Ties that Bind and Bond* (masters thesis, Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, 2009), Kankonde Bukasa Peter describes the ways in which precious remittance income is invested in the commission of popular music as praise-singing, arguing that diasporic cultural production constitutes a form of *libanga*, or survival through performance, among Congolese migrants in Johannesburg.

¹⁶⁸ Newell, *The Modernity Bluff*, 208.

cognitive response to the contradiction of the subject as an embodied consciousness that must create its own value.¹⁶⁹ Thus, colonizers fetishized Africa as the materialization of their belief in the history of Western civilization. By possessing the other, they performed self-discovery through domination. When the realization of past value is impossible, however, that present impossibility may serve as a resource, a speculative asset that acquires value counter-performatively, in mimicry. This is how Western commodities have pointed to the future for many Africans, fetishes not for consumption but for circulation, materializing a future worth the risk of migration. In this sense, Newell's trope of the bluff is suggestive of the financialization of everyday lives that arbitrage the gap between home and abroad, now and tomorrow, with social and material wealth.

Finding opportunity in crisis, both foreign investors and Africans themselves turn the modernization narrative inside out, dislodging Africa from a position of exception to just another landscape of risk. Narcisse was expert at leveraging appearances, engaging in a freely adapting aesthetic composed of a growing repertoire of personal assets that helped him adapt quickly to changes in circumstance. "With my family and the place I'm from, I thought *l'ivorité* was a bad joke. Nobody could tell that I was from the North. That's not why I left." He was insistent on this point; Narcisse wanted me to know that he always had options. "It was that I saw the writing on the wall. Like this country, Cote d'Ivoire is a nation of immigrants. Also like in this country, the people want to forget this fact. Abidjan used to be the place to be; the clubs were full of people like me from all over Africa. We were the most peaceful, the most hospitable, the wealthiest country, and everyone knew that. We weren't Congo or Liberia or Sierra Leone or Rwanda. But

¹⁶⁹ William Pietz, "Capitalism and Perversion: Reflections on the Fetishism of Excess in the 1980s," *Positions* 3, no. 2 (1995): 550.

then Bedie's people wanted to keep it all for themselves and it all became about Us and Them. And when they started killing Muslims, they got trigger happy and started going after homosexuals too. People were disappearing. I wasn't going to wait around and see how *that* turned out."

After the Christmas military coup and the violent elections in January 2000, Fortune bought Narcisse papers and flew him to New York. He was nineteen. It is possible that at such a young age, Narcisse had yet to acquire the self-possession and political savvy that he recalls. Newell's informants did not articulate an ironic distance from their own fantasies of self-actualization; indeed, it was their commitment to those fantasies that was made real through their exhibition. My ethnography, however, suggests that self-consciousness need not compromise a performance. Bourdieu maintained that the *habitus* operates through patterns of misrecognition that systematically structure the social unconscious. Thus, the most effective participation is intuitive rather than strategic.¹⁷⁰ It is true that excessive critical distance can undermine the improvisational dance of social interaction. However, as Randy Martin emphasized, dance is not opposed to thought. Quite the contrary, it is a practice that puts thought into motion.¹⁷¹ Signs, objects, and dispositions are continually shifting in relation to one another, dislodging a stable position of observation from which decisions can be made. Mastery is elusive at best; intentions are often adjusted in retrospect. Nevertheless, as Claude learned from both the rainforest and the zoo of the Congolese city, skepticism with respect to one's beliefs and inclinations may be the best way to navigate an unpredictable terrain.

¹⁷⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique*, 97–168. Also see *Outline of a Theory*, 18–19.

¹⁷¹ Randy Martin, *Knowledge, Ltd.: Toward a Social Logic of the Derivative* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015), 143–48.

This was also the case for Karim and his brothers, who were importing electronics and selling them in the north. Escalating tensions created lucrative arbitrage opportunities until the civil war broke out in 2002. “We couldn’t get to our customers without bribing the army on one side and the rebels on the other side. There was no way we could make any money.” As proud as he was of Samori Touré’s legacy, Karim was not tempted to join the rebels as his country spiraled into chaos. When supporters of President Laurent Gbagbo circulated a conspiracy theory about Akan and Dioula traders, it became impossible to safely distinguish frenemy from enemy.¹⁷² “They were making money off of hatred on all sides. If you weren’t on the inside, you were out, whoever you were.” Karim decided that it was a good time to visit his married sister in Chicago. Once he got to the United States, he applied for asylum.

“Why not Europe?” I asked, having brought the cousins together for lunch one afternoon. We met at a Ghanaian restaurant in Uptown, not far from the cramped one-bedroom apartment that Karim now shared with his wife, three children, and two cousins recently arrived from Abidjan.

“Sometime I ask myself that same question!” Karim said, laughing.

Narcisse replied that the more African history he learned, the more fed up he got with the very idea of Europe. “I wasn’t going to go live in a country that forced our people into slavery. Because that’s what it was. We didn’t get any political rights from the French until we died for them during World War II. The real difference between the north and the south of Côte d’Ivoire, if you ask me, is that the politicians from the south think that as long as they stay in bed with the French, they are better than *les Islamistes*.”

¹⁷² See Ruth Marshall-Fratani, “The War of ‘Who Is Who’: Autochthony, Nationalism, and Citizenship in the Ivorian Crisis,” *African Studies Review* 49, no. 2 (2006): 9–43.

“But didn’t the French claim that Gbagbo bombed their troops back in 2004?” I asked.

“Don’t believe everything you hear.”

“I thought Ouattara was acknowledged by the UN as the legitimate winner of the 2004 elections, even before Gbagbo refused to give up power?”

“That’s what they say now. But they would never have allowed a northern Muslim to take over the country if it hadn’t been for the Chinese. They’re the ones calling the shots now.”

Karim rolled his eyes. “They’re all crooks,” he said. “The trick is to make a living while you keep from getting killed.” Like many of my informants, he had been under the impression that Europe was already saturated with Africans, and that he would have more opportunities to make money in the States. After more than twenty years, his foreclosure was a sign that it was time to reconsider his options. His children were still small, but with so much police violence in the papers, he was beginning to wonder whether the United States was the best place to raise them, especially when he couldn’t afford to live in the suburbs. Karim had diversified his investments by building a house, room by room, in his natal village near the Burkina Faso border. He described the house, which his mother maintained as a hostel for migrants traveling for work on the cocoa plantations, as the biggest house in town. The strategic location of the village as a waystation also represented unique opportunities for cross-border commerce, though Karim was vague about the specifics. When I asked him if he believed the hype about Côte d’Ivoire’s “second economic miracle,” he shrugged. “*On ne mange pas les routes* [people don’t eat roads]. Ivorians have a talent at looking good for foreigners. A lot like this country, really. You’ve got to look out for yourself. The minute you trust the people in charge, they’ll turn on you and tell you they’re doing you a favor.”

Unlike Karim, Narcisse was not interested in returning to his country, though he was always open to changing his mind. He had visited in 2015 after hostilities simmered down. “I saw my mother, *ma tante*, my sisters. Even one of my brothers. I spent time in Abidjan with some old friends.” He winced. “Those *woubis* are getting older, let me tell you. They’re still fighting, every day.” Despite an outpouring of homophobic rhetoric, homosexuality is not illegal in Cote d’Ivoire, and Abidjan has become a center of queer activism. Was this the fighting he meant? Did he lose people to AIDS? These were not questions to be asked in Karim’s presence. “Me? I like my quiet Chicago life. Better to keep an ocean between my worlds.”

Though he was open with his anecdotes from the past and unconcerned with their inclusion here, Narcisse was extremely private about his life since migration. He told me he moved to Chicago because there were “too many Africans” in New York. He liked his job as a sommelier at an upscale restaurant. When I asked him about the person he had been arguing with that New Years’ Eve, he referred to him affectionately but chose not to elaborate. Perhaps Narcisse avoided accounting for himself because he liked to keep his options open. He lived a life without borders, fashioning himself according to a changing repertoire of possibilities. With inimitable style that is an art of imitation, Narcisse’s self-possession was both performance and counter-performance, not the neoliberal possession of human capital but a financialized self for whom anything is possible. His confidence in appearances was speculative: he performed the fetishism of self without attachment and leveraged personal assets without cynicism.

How could Narcisse look so good? I had bricolaged a story from his fragments of memory, Karim’s fuller account, and research to fill in the gaps. There was too much loss and violence there to permit such equanimity. Had the silence between discovery and abolition been replaced with a choice between Afropolitan aesthetics, on one hand, and Afropessimist trauma

on the other? Psychoanalysts maintain that “crossing the bridge” from victim to survivor requires narrating traumatic events in order to regain a sense of control over the present. As Clara Han elaborates, “often painful recovery of the everyday necessarily entails some kind of work of mourning, work which involves weaving traumatic memories, spaces marked with violence, and the fragmentation of social orders into ongoing intimate relationships.”¹⁷³ When the present remains as disarticulated as the past, however, storytelling may seem less like insight than blind repetition. In Han’s ethnography of informal debts in Chile, for example, an aging leftist’s disillusionment is a kind of trauma that is perpetuated by her disconnect with a younger generation who never knew hope at all. “The traumatic event, both inscribed as an unassimilable memory and transformative of the material biology of the individual, suggests that traumatic memory is a disease of time as well as an individual possession.”¹⁷⁴

Trauma is a disease of time. For migrants who must revise what they thought they knew, the spatial distance between here and there may translate into a temporal suspension, a nostalgia that resists a story. Under pressure to feel gratitude for the opportunity to migrate, they may get caught in a future of the past, the life that might be lived were they able to be at home. Claude struggled with what Han calls “referential dissonance,” an expression of chronic frustration with the shallow indifference of life in the U.S. On the other hand, personal identification with survival may preserve trauma as the centerpiece of self-understanding. Sylvie’s affective investment in her story of humanitarian grace still organized her relationships years after she arrived in Chicago. Neither Claude nor Sylvie thought of themselves as injured by their experiences, yet they were unable to shake the feeling that something was wrong. Karim treated

¹⁷³ Han, “The Work of Indebtedness,” 171.

¹⁷⁴ Han, 170.

his foreclosure as a momentary setback in a career that made profits from risk. When I asked Narcisse how he felt about what he had been through, he told me he was making do, and he had no regrets.

Trauma makes no sense because, like crisis, it organizes psychic life around an absence. “The return of the repressed proceeds slowly,” Freud writes. “It certainly does not occur spontaneously, but under the influence of all the changes in the conditions of life that abound throughout the history of civilization.”¹⁷⁵ Cathy Caruth describes Freud’s forced migration from Vienna to England in the last year of his life as a flight from fear that produced the fear of having fled, the shock of having to recreate a life from a distance.¹⁷⁶ The migration event is an occasion for forgetting that should set the stage for a new future. Yet Freud, who was at the end of his life and the abrupt end of his civilization, sees only the repetition of a past that recedes to the beginning of history itself. He finds there a founding act of violence that puts God in charge, ordering the havoc of mimetic desire. It’s a good story, but as the Bamongo remind us, *Dieu est mauvaise*. We may not be able to trust other human beings, but we can’t trust God either. If this is the case, the story offers little protection from the inevitable repetition of painful events. In fact, believing in a story, however compelling, is a form of repression because it insists on closure, disavowing a future that will reflect the past. The only certainty is the future, not the past. We will die, just as our parents have and our children will.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁵ Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones (London: Hogarth Press, 1939), 209.

¹⁷⁶ Cathy Caruth, “Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History,” *Yale French Studies* 79 (1991): 188–92.

¹⁷⁷ No regime of self-care can suture this fissure of death in life; as Catherine Malabou argues, we are all to some extent “ontological refugees,” or in a less dramatic formulation, we bear our non-existence alongside existence. Catherine Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2012), 4–6.

While I trusted Narcisse, I doubted his silences. Narcisse's affectionate distance reminded me of Fabian's informant Baba Ngoie, who had referred ambiguously to Mobutu's *authenticité* as a "revolution."¹⁷⁸ For Ngoie, the revolution was a bracket, the end of an era and the beginning of another, that subsumed his experience under the sign of history. Narcisse also referred to his *branché* adolescence as a personal revolution explaining everything that came before and shaping everything that followed. This metapragmatic framing undercuts any attempt to hold the category of "revolution" stable as a synonym for justice. It is always a word in quotation marks, a metaphor for an event that has no content yet changes everything. Fabian suggests that Ngoie was repressing trauma by mythologizing his life as history. This interpretation makes a great deal of sense, yet I resist the temptation to diagnose Narcisse. It wasn't as though my more forthcoming informants had escaped the trauma trap. "It is ironic, but nevertheless true," notes Meister, "that we must remember that we wanted vengeance in order to know that we have truly forgiven."¹⁷⁹ As he points out, the moral victory of a good story does not prevent the repetition of evil.

Testimony operates as a token of experience that is registered as a type of crime, assimilating experience to a myth that offers closure. But what if the ritual of reconciliation merely stages an apology in exchange for the preservation of wealth and power? Perhaps Claude was initially reluctant to give his story away because he was not ready to forgive. Unable to turn away from the past, Claude was compelled to honor a rage that was stoked by the nightly news. Sylvie, in contrast, had her eyes on a future reunion with the God that had come through for her, even if humanitarian grace had not. Meanwhile, she found some comfort in forgiveness, as long

¹⁷⁸ Fabian, "Forgetful Remembering," 501.

¹⁷⁹ Meister, *After Evil*, 8.

as she was forgetting the present. They had both been outsiders, like Narcisse, but they did not like it that way. Was it possible that Narcisse had internalized this referential dissonance? Speaking in an affective register that acknowledged pain without dwelling on it, Narcisse avoided producing a narrative that would repress his ambivalence towards the past. Meanwhile, he represented himself through embodied practices that both connected with others and stood apart. He had the apparent mastery of a movie star. “Clearly, it is another nature which speaks to the camera as compared to the eye,” writes Benjamin. “‘Other’ above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious.”¹⁸⁰ The technologies of self-regard had created a new way of collective being, Benjamin observed, through a mimetic play that both aestheticizes politics and politicizes art.

Narcisse called himself a narcissist, yet his appearance at the community events suggested otherwise. His double life alternated “queer moments” with obligations that could have been easily evaded. This juggling act may be interpreted, from the critical standpoint of Western subjectivity, as a betrayal of his true self in order to meet heteronormative expectations. Yet Narcisse saw it differently. “It doesn’t take much of my time,” he explained. “And I learned the hard way that it’s best to remember who I am.” For Narcisse, maintaining relations within the diaspora corrected for the emancipatory gesture of his adolescence. George Paul Meiu demonstrates a similar dynamic among young Samburu men in Kenya, who “queered” temporalities of aging by performing a fantasy of the exotic warrior for European tourists. “As these men navigated volatile economic contexts through competing notions of age, time, and the life course, their contradictory practices opened up new future-making potentialities in the

¹⁸⁰ Benjamin, “The Work of Art,” 42, 37.

material conditions of the present.”¹⁸¹ A behavior that the elders found shocking allowed the next generation to finance a future in a social order of time “out of joint.”

In my fieldnotes, even the most optimistic stories are scattered with scars. I began my ethnography during the fiftieth anniversary of independence for most of the countries in Africa. That commemoration evoked the humiliations of colonialism, perhaps, along with lost hopes for a decolonization that might have been different. As the spectacle of counterfeit democracy undermined confidence in government, prophetic Christianity and Islam substituted an apocalyptic vision of the end of days. A preoccupation with the occult was not the trace of past but a fear of the future, not the burden of the gift but anxiety that there would be no opportunity to settle one’s debts. People knew better than to trust good times; currency devaluations had already destabilized life trajectories, undermining the capacity to invest in the near future through marriage, study, and stable work. And then there was the migration itself, figuring as both the best and the worst day in their lives. After migration, the trouble continued: marriages fell apart, children self-destructed, and those whose countries had foreclosed on their futures faced foreclosure yet again. “Capitalism transforms the environment,” notes Max Tomba, “denaturalizing nature, destroying space through the acceleration of time, and altering the form of human experience and human being itself.”¹⁸²

Human rights cannot heal the trauma that is capitalism. The best it can do is to replace the triumphalism of human progress with morality tales of compulsory forgiveness and recovery. Yet this does not mean that healing is impossible. The reduction of ethical practice to compliance with moral law reduces the work of ritual to the reproduction of the status quo. Durkheim’s

¹⁸¹ George Paul Meiu, “‘Beach-Boy Elders’ and ‘Young Big-Men’: Subverting the Temporalities of Ageing in Kenya’s Ethno-Erotic Economies,” *Ethnos* 80, no. 4 (2015): 491.

¹⁸² Massimiliano Tomba, *Marx’s Temporalities* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013), vii.

Kantianism leads him to characterize the performance of social regeneration as a means to a transcendent end.¹⁸³ However, this approach perpetuates a dualism between thought and affect, theory and practice, that cannot acknowledge how the theological referent—God, the ancestors, or the law—also participates in the event, metapragmatically, and changes in the process. The ideal is activated as a magical force that turns the token of a particular situation into a categorical type. However, this does not imply closure, as Durkheim asserts, because the repetition of past ritual is not a form of absolute knowledge; it is a practice that makes a claim on the contingency of the future. It is the uncertainty of outcome that distinguishes ritual from theatre.¹⁸⁴ Rituals are not static referents in time; they respond to the demands of the environment as participants enact their commitments on terms that are not identical with the norm itself.¹⁸⁵ And while we generally think of ritual as ceremony, it is a general model for the ethics that are called for in moments that appear ordinary.¹⁸⁶ This is not altruism, which is motivated by fidelity to a moral law, but a commitment that might well fail. When moments of violence, loss, and deprivation generate a shock of awareness that we are other to ourselves, others can restore our capacity to endure pain, but only if they give up on controlling the outcome. Justice, in this sense, is not an object to be granted or achieved. It is a state of being that must be maintained, however imperfectly, through knowing practice.

The era of belief in politics has given way to the moral certainty of religion, on one hand, and a weary faith in the value of ethics, on the other. Even as globalization created more capital than ever before, modernity could not raise all boats by rationalizing the world. As revolutionary

¹⁸³ Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms*, 273–75.

¹⁸⁴ Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 39–46.

¹⁸⁵ See Laura Grillo, “African Ritual,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to African Religions*, ed. Elias Kifon Bongmba (London: Blackwell, 2012).

¹⁸⁶ Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident*, 24.

as if feels, popular culture does not undermine cultural hierarchy because mimicry is also mimesis; the difference within the counterfeit gesture either dissipates or becomes the next big thing. Financial instability has unraveled the imagined futures that hold communities together, and in response to this insecurity, emergent socialities submerge ideal forms in a quagmire of competing claims for justice.¹⁸⁷ Insofar as we are hostage to our stories, we evade our collective uncertainty. Nevertheless, as the weather changes, we find that there is no closure and no recovery from the trauma of the future.

¹⁸⁷ See Perry Mehrling, “Financialization and its Discontents,” *Finance and Society* 3, no. 1 (2017): 1–10.

CHAPTER 4

Good Moral Character:

The Categorical Imperatives of Immigration Law

Between my hands

*I have this code, curious to say the least,
And dare say nothing of it
For fear of provoking Kalifa.*

—Bernadette Dao Sanou, *A Decent Woman*, 1992

*"Our officials, so far as I know them, and I know only the lowest grades among them, never go hunting for crime in the populace, but, as the Law decrees, are drawn towards the guilty and must then send out us warders. That is the Law. How could there be a mistake in that?"
"I don't know this Law," said K.*

—Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, 1925

On September 19, 2014, Thomas Eric Duncan boarded an airplane in Liberia headed for Texas. His journey was a long time coming, an intention born from displacement and estrangement, rehearsed over decades of false starts and hesitations. Born in Liberia, Duncan spent most of his adult life in refugee camps waiting for a way out. Though his sister emigrated to the United States in 1989, her attempts to sponsor her siblings were repeatedly denied. In 1995, Duncan's partner and three-year-old son were resettled as refugees in Boston, leaving him behind. It was only in 2013—as his shattered country emerged from civil war—that he was able to return to Monrovia where he found a steady job with a FedEx contractor and was able to apply for a tourist visa. At around the same time, a little boy in neighboring Guinea died of the Ebola virus. Within a year, that single tragedy would reverberate along lines of personal contact to reach our protagonist, just as he was preparing to embark on his long-awaited journey.

Four days before Duncan's flight, his landlord's daughter became desperately ill. By mid-September, there had been 812 confirmed cases of Ebola in a country of 4.2 million people.¹ The virus was spreading quickly, but Marthalene Williams was the first case in the neighborhood, and few people had even heard about the epidemic. She was seven months pregnant and was complaining of stomach pain. Duncan rode with the family in a taxi, and when she was turned away from the hospital, he carried her back into the house. She died the next morning. A week later, Duncan was himself sent home from Texas Presbyterian hospital in Dallas, Texas, despite a high fever and inconclusive symptoms. By the time he died on October 8, the circumstances surrounding his migration, treatment, and simple act of kindness were the focus of fierce international debate.

"Look up 'likely visa overstay' in the dictionary," wrote Jessica Vaughn of the Center for Immigration Studies, "and you should find a picture of Thomas Eric Duncan ... a 40-something, single, unemployed Liberian who applied sometime in the last year for a visa to visit his sister in the United States."² Vaughn goes on to argue that these characteristics made him unsuitable for a nonimmigrant visa not only because his country was at the epicenter of the Ebola epidemic, but also because it has "the fifth highest overstay rate of any country in the world." She went on to argue that his recent residency outside his country of origin had indicated weak ties and the intention to immigrate. On the other hand, most American media coverage questioned his character based on the failure to mention his exposure to the virus on his airline forms.³ Debates

¹ World Health Organization, "Ebola Response Roadmap Situation Report," September, 18, 2014, <http://www.who.int/csr/resources/publications/ebola/response-roadmap/en/>.

² The fact that Duncan's exile from Liberia was a consequence of civil war did not factor into Vaughn's profile. Jessica Vaughn, "Dallas Ebola Patient Was Another Visa Mistake," Center for Immigration Studies, October 2, 2014, <https://cis.org/Vaughan/Dallas-Ebola-Patient-Was-Another-Visa-Mistake>.

³ Gary Tuchman et al., "U.S. Ebola Patient, Thomas Duncan, Lied About Exposure," *CNN Wire* October 2, 2014.

swirled through news circuits and internet sites evoking the perennial association of migration with contamination, tapping more generally into the anxieties of a society that saw itself in crisis. Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf excoriated Duncan's behavior as a case of failed citizenship and ingratitude towards the U.S. and promised to press charges following his deportation, should he recover.⁴ The Dallas District Attorney's Office considered following suit: "On a humanitarian note, it would be cruel and inhumane to go after a person on their death bed but at the same time the DA's office would want to show that there are consequences to entering the country by falsifying documents and then knowingly putting the public at risk."⁵

"Our tradition is to help somebody who needs help," Duncan's brother told reporters, expressing a sentiment that I heard repeatedly from Africans in Chicago during the months following his death. They empathized with his ordeal, rushing through a chaotic Monrovia in a doomed attempt to save a young woman's life. How could getting on that plane for Dallas represent an ethical failure? The fact that his body had served as a vector of disease had nothing to do with the man or his story. Paradoxically, an act of decency demonstrating Duncan's quality of character in the eyes of my informants had compromised his "good moral character"—a legal term of art indicating that a person is worthy of trust—in the eyes of the state.⁶ Illness, an opportunity for caregiving, was being treated as a social threat. Branded post mortem as an opportunist without scruples, Duncan was subjected to the second death of character assassination, his name an icon of contagion.

⁴ Jacque Wilson et al., "Ebola Patient's Leaving Liberia was 'Unpardonable,' its President says," *CNN Wire*, October 3, 2014; Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, "Sirleaf Pleads for Liberia, and for Africa," *Chicago Tribune*, October 20, 2014.

⁵ Gromer Jeffers, Jr., "Dallas County DA Craig Watkins Exploring Charges against Ebola Patient," *Dallas Morning News*, October 3, 2014.

⁶ See Margot K. Mendelson, "Constructing America: Mythmaking in U.S. Immigration Courts," *The Yale Law Journal* 119, no. 5 (2010): 1012–58.

“Who knew anything about ‘Ebola’?” one of my informants remarked. “In Africa, people get sick all the time and hospitals are always crowded. It looked like she was having a miscarriage.” Another pointed out that even if Duncan suspected that Marthelene had contracted the deadly disease, he felt fine when he got on the airplane. “What would you expect him to do? He’d been preparing for that trip all his life.” My friend Claude mentioned a double-standard with regard to crises in Africa. “One thing you can be sure about is that every white person in West Africa was getting out of there!” It always came down to race, he said. Europeans were allowed to flee danger, whereas Africans, deemed responsible for their own illness, were held back. “It’s like they think we *are* the disease,” he said.

A number of my informants complained that President Sirleaf’s attitude was all too common among elites in their countries of origin. Lucien, a young man from Togo, remarked that Africans who have been educated abroad tend to “lose themselves.” In her rush to placate foreign donors, Lucien argued, the President disregarded a more fundamental law: the basic unity of matter.⁷ When I asked him what he meant by this, he switched the chemical metaphor to kinship: Africans may fight among themselves, but when they are away from home, they know their mother. “A good mother doesn’t abandon her children.” Lucien was studying Business Administration in a city college, and his future plans were uncertain. But wherever he was living, he was going to do what he could to overthrow Togo’s nepotistic Gnassingbé regime. “We must not become Liberia.” Lucien was sensitive to media representations of Africa at its most desperate and chaotic.⁸ It took the Ebola scare to bring attention to the new African diaspora, he

⁷ This speaker was referencing Kwame Nkrumah’s *Consciencism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1964), 80. “It is the basic unity of matter, despite its varying manifestations, which gives rise to egalitarianism. Basically, man is one, for all men have the same basis and arise from the same evolution according to materialism. This is the objective ground of egalitarianism.”

⁸ See Beverly G., Hawk, ed., *Africa’s Media Image* (New York: Praeger, 1992).

pointed out.⁹ “We know we’re not wanted, but we try to do what’s right.” Then he laughed. “At least most of us do.”

How is it that Eric Duncan’s foreign body became a matter of national security, his movements an object of public scrutiny, his personal tragedy subject to moral condemnation? All migrants encounter to some degree the invasive questions and moral skepticism that accompany the vetting process of admission. The adjudication of an immigration case is a forensic procedure that theoretically applies the rule of law. Under the Plenary Power Doctrine, however, the U.S. immigration apparatus operates entirely within the executive branch of government, without judicial oversight.¹⁰ Applications for lawful permanent residence may be denied on a number of grounds, such as past criminal convictions, disability, and mental illness, a history of substance abuse, past immigration violations, polygamy, and inadequate income.¹¹ The Trump

⁹ Coverage of the Ebola epidemic effectively carried on the tradition of sensationalist “Africanity.” See Laura Seay and Kim Yi Dionne, “The Long and Ugly Tradition of Treating Africa as a Dirty, Diseased Place,” *The Washington Post*, August 25, 2014. On the other hand, some recent representations seek to break with that convention, casting African entrepreneurs in the United States as a model minority. See, for example, G. Pascal Zachary, “The Hotel Africa,” *The Wilson Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (2006): 48–55.

¹⁰ The Plenary Power Doctrine is a defining feature of U.S. immigration policy, with roots in Supreme Court rulings between 1889 and 1893 rejecting constitutional challenges to restrictive state and federal legislation. Of particular significance was the “finality clause” in the 1891 Immigration Act declaring that the admissions decisions of immigration officers “shall be final,” and denying foreigners constitutional protection such as due process. See Hidetaka Hirota, “The Moment of Transition: State Officials, the Federal Government, and the Formation of American Immigration Policy,” *The Journal of American History* 99, no. 4 (2013): 1092–1108.

¹¹ The Immigration Act of 1882 barred “any convict, lunatic, idiot, or any person unable to take care of himself or herself without becoming a public charge.” The codification of a poverty threshold marked the expansion of federal authority into areas previously left to the discretion of states during a period that witnessed growing non-European migration. Its application and enforcement has been controversial ever since. See Daniel J. Wilson, “‘No Defectives Need Apply’: Disability and Immigration,” *OAH Magazine of History* 23, no. 3 (2009): 35–40; Lisa Sun-Hee Park, “Criminalizing Immigrant Mothers: Public Charge, Health Care, and Welfare Reform,” *International Journal of Sociology of the Family* 37, no. 1 (2011): 27–47; and Amada Armenta, *Who Polices Immigration Enforcement? The Rise of Policing as Immigration Enforcement* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 15–35. In April 2019, the Trump administration issued a proposed rule that would find inadmissible anyone who has received any form of public assistance, including emergency Medicaid, for more than twelve months within a three-year period. Limited English proficiency was also added as a risk factor for public charge. On October 11, 2019, a federal judge in New York issued a temporary injunction against the rule a few days before it was

administration multiplied these obstacles to admission, banning travel for citizens from certain predominantly Muslim countries.¹² As scholars have pointed out, the Plenary Power Doctrine institutionalizes a “routine exceptionality” that suspends the law. A noncitizen may be sanctioned in either sense of the contranym: excluded or permitted to enter and remain.¹³ Immigration authorities act with discretion, producing decisions that may express personal bias, the directives of a presidential administration, or the fluctuations of public opinion. In its indeterminacy, immigration law seems unrelated to other national policies and practices. Experiences such as Duncan’s disease remind migrants that their foreignness subverts the value of their actions.

Nation-states have always been ambivalent about noncitizens. Determined by their borderlands, they have treated immigrants as economic necessity and political threat, humanitarian obligation and necessary evil. Along with colonial subjects and racial minorities, foreigners were the experimental subjects of research that laid the foundations for today’s “biopolitics,” Michel Foucault’s term for the application of knowledge as power over a population.¹⁴ In the classic anthropological sense, migrants are perceived as dangerous by virtue of their liminality. This word was introduced by Arnold van Gennep to describe the transition

scheduled to come into effect. “Judges Block Green Card Denials for Immigrants on Public Aid,” *New York Times*, October 11, 2019.

¹² Based on Executive Order 13780, issued in March 2017 and revised in April 2018, admission to the United States was prohibited to citizens of Iran, Libya, North Korea, Somalia, Syria, Venezuela, and Yemen. The ban specified exceptions from country to country and could be waived on a case-by-case basis. Court rulings prevented provisions of the order from being enforced until it was upheld by the Supreme Court in June 2018.

¹³ See Susan Bibler Coutin et al., “Routine Exceptionality: The Plenary Power Doctrine, Immigrants, and the Indigenous Under U.S. Law,” *University of California Irvine Law Review* 4 (2014): 97–120; and Hiroshi Motomura, “The Rights of Others: Legal Claims and Immigration Outside the Law,” *Duke Law Journal* 59, no. 8 (2010): 1723–85.

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79*, trans. Gordon Burchell (New York: Palgrave, 2008).

between social states during which personhood is suspended, what he called a rite of passage.¹⁵ For Victor Turner, the critical feature of the liminal stage is its indeterminacy. “Betwixt and between” nature and culture, sacred and profane, the initiate—like the migrant—is identified with the passage itself: no longer and not yet classified. This collapse of distinction releases energy that is dangerous yet necessary for social regeneration. Turner emphasizes the creativity of this potential disorder, which “breaks, as it were, the cake of custom and enfranchises speculation.”¹⁶ His interlocutor, Mary Douglas, on the other hand, is concerned with the problem of pollution. Rituals of initiation, sacrifice, and purification “condemn any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications.”¹⁷ Taking the human body as a metaphor for society, Douglas identifies the everyday anxieties surrounding “purity and danger” as a symbolic mechanism of boundary maintenance through which a group maintains structural coherence. Thus, while Turner understands the state of liminality as a temporary yet recurrent condition in time, it is for Douglas a continual threat to the spatial preservation of order.¹⁸ This

¹⁵ In his 1909 classic of armchair anthropology, Arnold Van Gennep introduced the concepts of separation, liminality, and incorporation as three phases of rites of passage, sacred performances that determine the organization of individuals within groups and thereby structure the profane activities of everyday life. While separation and incorporation are transitions, *l'état de marge* is a duration of suspension from the profane with sacred characteristics. Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

¹⁶ Victor Turner emphasized the ambivalence of the liminal stage as an “interstructural situation,” or state of structural indeterminacy: “Liminality may perhaps be regarded as the Nay to all positive structural assertions, but as in some sense the source of them all, and, more than that, as a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise.” Victor Turner, “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage” (The Proceedings of the American Ethnological Society, Symposium on New Approaches to the Study of Religion, Seattle, WA, 1964), 48.

¹⁷ “The person who must pass from one [state] to another is himself in danger and emanates danger to others. The danger is controlled by ritual which precisely separates him from his old status, segregates him for a time and then publicly declares his entry to his new status.” For Douglas, the pollution of liminality extends beyond rites of passage to taint whatever violates cultural categorization as “matter out of place.” Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966), 37.

¹⁸ Turner, “Betwixt and Between,” 46.

spatiotemporal divergence in perspective implies different conceptions of the political state: temporally, it exists through its interventions in the lives of its people; spatially it is an image of control that secures a territory.

Representations of migration express both temporal and spatial dimensions of liminality. When their labor or expertise is in demand, migrants are a potential source of the wealth that regenerates social life. Yet they are also depicted as a parasite that compromises the integrity of society, conceived as an organism with permeable boundaries that are vulnerable to attack. This spatial metaphor animated the panic surrounding Ebola, a disease that violates the boundaries of the body and contaminates through contact with bodily fluids. Appeals to the law sought to activate its function as a regulatory system with the capacity to sustain the integrity of the whole. According to this organic conception of the state, the legitimacy of law is rooted in the sovereignty of a nation, a political community of citizens with shared interests and social substance. However, this presumption of an aggregate political subject on which all theories of social contract are based is easily challenged by any empirical account, past and present, of the changing and partial population of any nation-state.¹⁹ Indeed, liberal democracy is the story of gradual—and often contested—extension of legal recognition to people living in a perpetual state of liminality: men without property, former slaves, women, homosexuals and non-binary persons, prisoners, and the mentally ill.

The status of noncitizens, however, has remained a matter of national sovereignty. In the final decades of the twentieth century, as cross-border mobility became a visible feature of the sociopolitical landscape, there was a relaxation of the rules and processes governing noncitizen

¹⁹ Paulina Ochoa Espejo, *The Time of Popular Sovereignty: Process and the Democratic State* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Press, 2011).

participation in civil society.²⁰ With 9/11 and the global “war on terror,” however, the common-sense appeal of national identity has made a comeback. Popular leaders refer to immigration in the language of war, mobilizing the executive authorities of law enforcement and bilateral negotiation to manage borders in the name of sovereignty. Immigration officials and local police employ military tactics and new surveillance technologies, while integrating financial markets becomes the dominant sign of globalization.

This chapter considers the relation of noncitizens to the law as a problem of property for the financial state. Insofar as popular sovereignty is understood as the corporate ownership of national territory, citizenship constitutes a property right that confers certain exclusive privileges as a function of birthright. Statistically speaking, the accident of birth is the primary determinant of a person’s health, education, and access to resources; in wealthy countries with robust social welfare, citizenship is a form of inherited wealth that is only available to foreigners through a contract with the state.²¹ In recent decades, however, austerity policies and stagnant wages have reduced the benefits of citizenship. At the same time, financial deregulation has enhanced the value of private property as collateral in secondary markets, where the right to trade an asset is independent of its ownership. As a platform for the performance of contracts, property underwrites debts that fund consumption and generate income by speculative means. In the same way, citizenship rights may be understood not only in terms of their use-value as a type of identity, but also as a token that can be leveraged as a speculative claim to the future.

²⁰ Linda Bosniak, *The Citizen and the Alien: Dilemmas of Contemporary Membership* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Yasemin Nuhoglu Soysal, *Limits of Citizenship: Migrants and Postnational Membership in Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

²¹ Ayelet Shachar, *The Birthright Lottery: Citizenship and Global Inequality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

The value of American citizenship is linked to the dollar. Like national currency, citizenship is an asset that commensurates difference within the boundaries of states and arbitrages the value inequalities between them. It is a form of collateral that securitizes the financial state, justifying forms of biopolitical control just as Treasury bonds securitize the state's finance, justifying austerity policies to maintain fiscal health. I argue that like the legal arrangements of financial capitalism, refugee and immigration adjudications rely on indeterminate criteria that are retroactively deemed necessary. In other words, what is rationalized by state actors to ensure the security of the state is a hedging strategy against market volatility. Migrants bear the risk of national sovereignty. It is not the migrant but the law of the liminal state that is parasitic: contingent, infectious, and opportunistic.

Speaking the Language of Rights

Amina's cousin Khady lives in a comfortable bungalow in Melrose Park, a Chicago suburb, with her husband Mamadou and their two small children. "You need to help them," Amina told me one day, shortly before I was leaving on a trip to Senegal on my own. "She is like my sister."

Khady never knew her mother, who had married Amina's father's brother, and died when her daughter was only two years old. Though she was raised by her father's two other wives, she preferred to spend time in her paternal uncle's household. When Amina left for New York, Khady moved in with Amina's parents in Dakar to help care for Amina's younger siblings. She was fifteen then; five years later she would accompany Amina's eleven-year-old sister Fatou to join Amina's family in the United States.

“Cheik and I had just gotten married, and I had a baby on the way,” Amina recalled on the way to Khady’s house. “I needed help, and I missed my family.” Cheik’s mother, who owned a successful company in Bamako, was able to obtain a business visa for Khady and a tourist visa for Fatou. Once they arrived, Amina submitted an asylum application on Fatou’s behalf based on the threat of female genital cutting (FGC).²²

This was a fate that Amina had not escaped. It was a turning point in her childhood, the moment when she realized that to trust adults can hurt you. “It’s an important lesson to learn, but boy was I pissed!” Her mother was even angrier, having forbidden her own mother, Amina’s grandmother, to go through with it. She had put her foot down and thought she had authority. “My mother was a schoolteacher. She expected people to listen to her. But my grandmother thought she knew what was best. She told me that it would make me a better woman. She made me ashamed.” Amina was eleven years old, and her grandmother told her she was running out of time. “I was big enough to fight back, but for some reason I didn’t. It was a terrible thing.”

Claims for asylum based on FGC posed a problem for anthropologists. In 1996, the U.S. Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA) set a precedent by granting asylum to a Togolese teenager, Fauziya Kassindja (spelled “Kasinga” in court documents), in a case that expanded permissible grounds of persecution—race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group—to include gender. Until this point, asylum had generally been limited to persons who could demonstrate a credible fear of injury or death based on collective deviation from a norm. Governments had been, and remain, reluctant to set a precedent by extending

²² There has been disagreement over the most appropriate terminology for referencing a practice that has many variations. I use the purely descriptive term of Female Genital Cutting (FGC). Others include Female Genital Mutilation, Female Genital Modification, and Female Circumcision. See Harriet D. Lyons, “Genital Cutting: The Past and Present of a Polythetic Category,” *Africa Today* 53, no. 4 (2007): 3–17.

protection beyond individuals who are being persecuted by the state based on their membership in a minority group.²³ Thus, Kassindja's lawyers were tasked not only with demonstrating a threat to their client, but also generalizing that threat to similarly situated women. As Charles Piot points out, this dilemma highlighted a logical incompatibility between eligibility for humanitarian relief based on group membership and the right of the individual under human rights law. The ritual enactment of Kassindja's case required converting her particular situation into a type of persecution. In other words, her culture was put on trial. Accordingly, her lawyers told a story of "timeless tradition of mutilating rituals and unyielding patriarchy in remote rural villages," representing a stereotype of primitive Africa that anthropologists had been countering for generations.²⁴

The *Kasinga* decision was a victory for feminist activists who, finding common cause with colonial missionaries a century before, targeted FGC as a form of "culture as torture," demanding abolition as part of a global platform for women's rights. From this universalist position, the fact that so many African women defended the practice was seen as further evidence of their subjugation.²⁵ This presented a double bind for feminist anthropologists, who were bound by the ethics of their profession to honor their informants' worldview.²⁶ As Marilyn Strathern notes, this position is awkward not only because the universal aspirations of feminism are inconsistent with the cultural particularity of women's experience; the paradox of

²³ See Karen Musalo, "A Short History of Gender Asylum in the United States," *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (2010): 46–63.

²⁴ Charles Piot, "Representing Africa in the Kasinga Asylum Case," in *Female Circumcision: Multicultural Perspectives*, ed. Rogaia Mustafa Abusharaf (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 232.

²⁵ Christine J. Walley, "Searching for 'Voices': Feminism, Anthropology, and the Global Debate over Female Genital Operations," *Cultural Anthropology* 12, no. 3 (1997): 405–38.

²⁶ Bateson, Gregory, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), 206–12.

ethnography as a form of scientific knowledge is also exposed. The FGC debate is waged between the explicit universalism of feminism and the implicit universalism of cultural relativism from which anthropologists draw their authority.²⁷ Thus, if discourse denouncing FGC relies on sweeping generalizations about its function in controlling female desire, the culturalist defense of the practice assumes consensus with respect to its meaning and value among members of particular societies.²⁸

For decades, this deadlock between individual and group rights has played out in the United Nations as a political contest between states that justify military interventions on the basis of “an obligation to protect” and states that define their interests in terms of cultural sovereignty. “The language of rights is the language of no compromise,” writes L. Amede Obiora, a Nigerian legal scholar who advocates for “a middle course” to the FGC debate grounded in a human right to health. Because many African women consider FGC a vital expression of collective personhood, she argues, criminalization is likely to reinforce commitment to the practice, whereas education and the clinical accommodation of moderate forms of genital modification are more likely to shift attitudes over time.²⁹ Sylvia Wynter develops this line of reasoning by bringing attention to the natural theology of human rights discourse. FGC is such an emotional battleground, she argues, because the ritual marking of the physical body inscribes the code of law on the social body, instantiating a teleological schema that directs “what it is to be a good

²⁷ Marilyn Strathern, “An Awkward Relationship: The Case of Feminism and Anthropology,” *Signs* 12, no. 2 (1987): 276–92.

²⁸ See Richard A. Schweder, “‘What About Female Genital Mutilation?’ and Why Understanding Culture Matters in the First Place,” in *The Free Exercise of Culture*, ed. Richard A. Shweder et al. (New York: Russell Sage Foundation Press, 2002).

²⁹ L. Amede Obiora, “Bridges and Barricades: Rethinking Polemics and Intransigence in the Campaign Against Female Circumcision,” *Case Western Reserve Law Review* 47, no. 2 (1997): 275.

man and woman of one's kind."³⁰ Western modernity disavowed the "sociogenic" foundations of its own civilizing narrative, according to Wynter, when it embraced scientific reason as the necessity of natural freedom.³¹ This culture-of-nature is the self-representation of an abstract, universal standpoint that can only be sustained through the repression of its own nature-of-culture.³² Through industrial processes of slavery, imprisonment, and genocide, physical branding and mutilation have been techniques that constitute others as a resource for use and consumption. Despite a disavowal of racism, human rights institutions perform a progress narrative that implies evolutionary superiority. According to the moral code of modern law, subjectivity confers a property right over one's own body. This implies an understanding of the self as what one "has" rather than what one "is," a prerequisite for capitalist social relations of commodification and consumption. Defenders of individual freedom must sustain the nature-culture binary by targeting for abolition those excessive, "unnatural" practices of other cultures that promote "dividual" personhood over individual autonomy.³³ Ironically, Africans are considered primitive not because they are closer to nature, but because they are not natural enough.

Amina considered herself a feminist. She and many of the women she knew experienced chronic health problems as a consequence of FGC. Like Obiora, however, she took a pragmatic

³⁰ Sylvia Wynter, "'Genital Mutilation' or 'Symbolic Birth?' Female Circumcision, Lost Origins, and the Acculturation of Feminist/Western Thought," *Case Western Reserve Law Review* 47, no. 2 (1997): 507.

³¹ Following Fanon, Wynter structures her argument according to a dialectic triad: phylogeny (species evolution), ontogeny (individual development), and sociogeny (social relations). See Wynter, "Genital Mutilation, 544–52; and Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967). See David Marriot, "Inventions of Existence: Sylvia Wynter, Frantz Fanon, Sociogeny, and "the Damned," *The New Centennial Review* 11, no. 3 (2011): 45–89.

³² See Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "Anthropology and the Savage Slot: The Poetics and Politics of Otherness," in *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present* (Santa Fe, NM: SARIS Press, 1991).

³³ Marilyn Strathern uses the concept of "dividuality" to consider the gendering of personhood in *The Gender of the Gift* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 13.

approach to the issue. Through her own experience with the immigration system, she had learned the lesson of self-ownership not as a form of identity but as a position from which to consider her options. “Of course you have to tell the truth,” she told me. “But you also have to know what they want to hear.” She had filled out paperwork and interpreted in court for a number of women who had fled Mali to escape arranged marriages, which invariably involved FGC. “Sometimes they lose the case because they don’t want to talk about the procedure,” she told me. They had other reasons to be afraid. Perhaps they were being married to a much older man with two other wives. Perhaps they were in love with someone else or had given birth to a child that they would have to leave behind. “One friend of mine said: ‘I don’t want to wind up like my mother. Isn’t that enough?’ And I told her, ‘you can’t get a visa just because you’re poor. You can only get one just because you’re rich.’” For women who possessed nothing, their most intimate scars became a resource. Amina had difficulty convincing some of them that the threat of FGC mattered more than the actuality of domestic abuse. They were even more shocked by the request that they submit pictures of their genitals as evidence that they had or had not undergone the procedure. Amina had done so to demonstrate what might happen to her sister. “In Africa, they do it to prove your ‘good moral character’ to your husband. Here, it proves your ‘good moral character’ to the court.”

Khady did not possess the token that would have proved her value to the U.S. government. Unlike Amina and Fatou, whose mother was from Mali, Khady’s parents were both Wolof, a group that does not practice FGC. Nor did she qualify for family reunification. Afraid of deportation, she rarely went out alone. “She was there when all three of my boys were born,” Amina told me. “I don’t know what I would have done without her help. But I’ll tell you, she had a hard time at the beginning. She was too shy to practice English, and she had a bad boyfriend

for a while who acted just like Cheik, with all his shouting and his moods.” Nearly a decade after she arrived, Khady eventually became a legal permanent resident when she married Mamadou. “He’s a good man. When she married him, I didn’t have to worry about her so much anymore. I want you to help him because he has helped us.”

They’re doing well for themselves, I thought to myself, sinking into their oversized sofa. In those modest rooms everything was big: the matching furniture, the flat screen television, a wooden armoire from Senegal that nearly touched the ceiling, velvet drapes that covered the windows and wall. Khady had a hair braiding salon in the basement, but the secret to their success was Mamadou’s long-term employment as a fisherman off the coast of Alaska.

“The fishing thing was a lucky accident, really,” Mamadou said. He was Soninke, from the Malian side of the Senegal river. “I never even ate fish when I was young! At home I was a merchant, like my father. I traveled all over West Africa, all the way down to Congo.” He lived in Brazzaville for almost ten years, where he had a son also named Mamadou. “Then my father got sick, and I had to return to Mali to help him with the business.” Three years later he consented to an arranged marriage in Bamako and fathered a second son, Moctar. He first traveled to the U.S. on a business visa. “I never planned to stay in the United States. But I like to try new things, and that has made my life what it is.” In a Seattle bar, he met a Guinean man who had all the money and all the time to go back to Africa and visit his family in style. “He told me he only worked nine months out of the year. I liked the sound of that, so I went back to the boat with him and that’s what I’ve been doing ever since.”

“It’s good when he’s here,” Khady said quietly, passing us cans of mango juice.

Mamadou sighed. “Even when I’m working, this is my home now. I want to bring my family together.” He handed me a thick folder full of documents. He had petitioned for both his

sons to join him in the United States. They had interviews at the Dakar Consulate three days after my arrival.

When I got to Dakar, twenty-year old Mamadou *fi*ls, seventeen-year-old Moctar, and Mama Niang, Amina's mother, were all waiting at the airport. Everyone seemed relieved to see me, as though I had the power to guide them to their destination. The brothers appeared close, yet they had met less than a month ago, when Mamadou *fi*ls flew to Bamako from Brazzaville. It had been awkward for both of them. "We were staying with my father's people," Moctar told me in a faltering voice. "Then we took a bus and now we are at the house of Khady's father." Mamadou *fi*ls spoke neither Bambara nor Wolof and was relying on Moctar to translate informal conversations into French. During a moment alone, he admitted to me that he was feeling lost in a Muslim world at Christmas. Having his father's first name indicated not only his paternity but also his father's religion, Islam, about which he had always been curious. But now he felt like a fish out of water. "I'll take you to a Congolese church when we are back in Chicago so that you can speak Lingala," I told him.

We reviewed the State Department checklist together to ensure that their papers were in order. They had each brought a picture of themselves standing stiffly beside their father, evidence of the effort Mamadou *p*ère had made to know his sons. Calling from Chicago that evening, their father wanted to make sure that we were together and had everything we needed to pass inspection. Mama Niang ensured that he was covering all expenses: taxis, food for the boys, and miscellaneous fees. "It's hard for all of us here," she told him, asking for more. He would buy their tickets to the U.S. as soon as their visas were confirmed. He had to be back on the boat in January and was anxious to see them before then.

At 6 am on Tuesday morning Mamadou and Moctar met me on the sidewalk in front of the U.S. Embassy. With them was a tall, elderly man in an elegant boubou. Père Niang had been a police commander under President Léopold Sédar Senghor, yet his authority failed him repeatedly over the course of that difficult day. “I haven’t been downtown in a long time,” he told us. “My office was right over there.” A number of early-rising beggars were working the line, refusing to walk away empty-handed. “Back then people had more respect,” he muttered, giving out a handful of change. A truck came around and disgorged seven young policemen in military dress, with maroon berets and combat boots, who promptly roused civilians from the only bench and then spread themselves out, much to Père Niang’s dismay. Eventually a guard from the embassy marched us single file to the consular window where we were told that we could not accompany the petitioners inside. “They are *children!*” Père Niang objected, an exaggeration perhaps, at least in Mamadou’s case. Yet the young men seemed panicked and vulnerable as they were swept into that featureless façade. “Let me speak to your supervisor,” Père Niang demanded. “I have a right to see a consular official!” I added. The guard pointed to a sign indicating that I had no such right, at least with respect to someone else’s immigration matter.

Back at the end of the street we talked with other relatives, many having made the trip from Mali, Mauritania, and Gambia. Most of them had family members in the United States. As the hours passed, we began to wilt in the heat, and some of us sat on the pavement, reluctant to step away before the interviews would end. When I pulled out my laptop, one of the soldiers came over to me. “What are you doing with that?”

“Why is that your business?” Père Niang admonished him.

I promptly put away my laptop, but it was no use. Their bickering escalated, and I was soon being escorted back to the embassy complex for an identity check. “I can’t tell you how sorry I am,” lamented Père Niang when I returned. “They are so poorly trained.”

A man from Mauritania approached us with a sheet of paper in his hand. “Would you mind explaining this to me?” His daughter had just returned with a referral for a DNA test. About an hour later, Moctar emerged from his ordeal equally confused: his visa would also require genetic verification as well as a certificate from the Malian police authority. Mamadou, on the other hand, was told that he could pick up his visa in a week.

“Perhaps it’s because Mali’s a Muslim country,” I suggested. Père Niang agreed that politics might have something to do with it. We spent the rest of the day on a wild goose chase, driven by Père Niang’s insistence that there was an official somewhere in Dakar who could save Moctar a trip to Bamako. Why Moctar and not Mamadou, we wondered, when their cases were identical? If anything, the family had expected problems to arise with respect to the son who had been separated from his father for so long. No one doubted Moctar’s paternity; his parents’ lineages had been intertwined for generations. The President of Mali had recently been ousted in a military coup, and the French had intervened to squelch a separatist uprising in the north that was driven by religious extremists. Nevertheless, the retired Senegalese bureaucrat could not imagine that Islamic faith would itself be a cause of suspicion. “Moctar comes from a good family,” he said. “If they had let me in, I would have been able to tell them that.”

Most legal permanent residents in the United States have gained status through family members. Since 1965, roughly 70 percent of all visas to live in the United States have been reserved for the relatives of citizens and permanent residents. Immediate family members of U.S. citizens—spouses, parents, and unmarried children under twenty-one—are entitled to derivative

status under the Immigration and Nationality Act and may immigrate within a few months. Other applicants are subject to a numerical limit and are registered on the visa waiting list. This includes the adult children and siblings of citizens, as well as the spouses and unmarried children of legal permanent residents. People compete on a worldwide basis for family and employment-based visas according to the date of their application and a per-country limit on the number of visas that may be issued in a single year. The senior Mamadou was sponsored by his employer, and because he was the citizen of a country with a relatively low demand for visas to the U.S., he received legal permanent residency less than a year after he began working for the Seattle fishery. He applied for Khady's permanent residency when they married and sponsored his sons as soon as he became a citizen. It should have been a straightforward case.

In recent years, however, the blurry distinction between biological and “fictive” kin had been flagged by the U.S. government as a problem for family reunification among Africans. In February 2008, the State Department launched a pilot program matching the DNA of family-based applicants with petitioners who had already been admitted as refugees. In October of that year, all processing of applications under that category from East and West Africa was suspended, a decision that stranded thousands of people with approved petitions in a liminal state of transition.³⁴ During my fieldwork, I encountered a number of people who had reluctantly left children and elderly parents behind in refugee camps after being assured by officials that reunion was imminent. “They promised us, ‘Just go. We will send you the children,’” reported Theogene, whose family had fled from Burundi to Tanzania in 1972. “But we have been waiting, and three

³⁴ Melody Hearten-Johnson, “DNA Determines Family Reunification: U.S. Refugee Programs Halted in Africa,” *University of Washington Bothell Policy Journal* (Fall 2009): 19–28.

years later, still the children haven't come."³⁵ Margot, a refugee from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), was the only member of her family to be resettled in 2008. Three years later, her mother died from complications of malaria at the Dzaleka Refugee Camp in Malawi. The family reunification program for African refugees was finally restored in early 2013 with new anti-fraud measures, including a mandatory DNA test. The administration's annual report assured Congress that "these measures will mitigate attempted fraud and enable bona fide refugees to join existing family members in the United States."³⁶ Though DNA testing is not required for all family-based visas, it has become increasingly prevalent at the consular level for applicants living outside the United States as an "optional" measure to bolster one's case.

The introduction of biometrics into the immigration process raises two related questions. First, why is it necessary to establish a biological link when kinship is a social relation? Second, what is the significance of kinship as a rationale for migration? Biological descent has not always been a requirement for derivative relations under immigration law. The 1951 UN Refugee Convention emphasized the unity of the family as "the natural and fundamental group unit of society" without further specification.³⁷ However, while family law has become increasingly flexible in its treatment of domestic arrangements, immigration law in most countries has become more restrictive with respect to biological filiation, excluding even functional family formations that are prevalent in the host society.³⁸ In the United States, a

³⁵ Shana Wills, *Retooling Systems: Enhancing the Integration of African Refugees in Illinois* (Chicago: United African Organization Policy Brief, 2009), 6.

³⁶ United States Department of State, Homeland Security and Health and Human Services, *Proposed Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2014*, 78 FR 62415 October 21, 2013, iii.

³⁷ United Nations General Assembly, *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*, United Nations, Treaty Series 189, (July 28, 1951): 137, IV(B).

³⁸ J. Taitz et al., "The Last Resort: Exploring the Use of DNA Testing for Family Reunification," *Health and Human Rights* 6, no. 1 (2002): 20–32; Shani M. King, "U.S. Immigration Law and the Traditional Nuclear Conception of Family: Toward a Functional Definition of Family that Protects Children's

political shift towards a view of international migration as a form of international welfare has undermined the appeal of family-based migration in some quarters.³⁹ During the Trump administration, this trend found expression in policies that significantly reduced admissions, especially for Muslims and applicants with low incomes.⁴⁰ According to a 2017 press release:

Most green cards in the United States are awarded based on an antiquated system of family ties, not skill or merit. This system of Chain Migration—whereby one immigrant can bring in their entire extended families, who can bring in their families and so on—de-skills the labor force, puts downward pressure on wages, and increases the deficit. Chain Migration also undermines national security, by failing to establish merit-based criteria for evaluating entrants into the United States—instead, familial relations are all that is required to obtain a green card and, in turn, become a voting U.S. Citizen within a short period of time, with access to Federal welfare and government benefits.⁴¹

A preoccupation with fraud may simply reflect a resurgent nationalism that perceives all immigration as damaging to the body politic. From a national security standpoint, Moctar’s petition may have raised a red flag with the State Department due to his origin in a majority Muslim country.⁴²

Fundamental Human Rights,” *Columbia Human Rights Law Review* 41 (2009): 509–67; and Aubry Holland, “The Modern Family Unit: Toward a More Inclusive Vision of the Family in Immigration Law,” *California Law Review* 96, no. 4 (2008): 1049–91.

³⁹ Kathleen M. Moore, “U.S. Immigration Reform and the Meaning of Responsibility,” *Studies in Law, Politics and Society* 20 (2000); U.S. Congress, “Role of Family-Based Immigration in the U.S. Immigration System,” Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, Refugees, Border Security, and International Law of the Committee on the Judiciary, House of Representatives, 110th Congress, First Session, May 8, 2007, Serial Number 110-26.

⁴⁰ Sabrina Tavernise, “Immigrant Population Growth in the U.S. Slows to a Trickle,” *New York Times*, September 26, 2019. Through regulatory changes, policy memos, and management practices, the Trump administration fully exploited its executive power over the immigration process to carry out an assertive agenda with the cumulative effect of reducing lawful immigrant admissions to a trickle. In addition, the refugee ceiling has been lowered each year—from 110,000 in FY 2017 to a proposed 18,000 in FY 2020—with the stated goal of eliminating the program altogether and limiting humanitarian visas to severely backlogged asylum courts. See Sarah Pierce, *Immigration-Related Policy Changes in the First Two Years of the Trump Administration* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2019).

⁴¹ White House, “It’s Time to End Chain Migration,” press release, December 15, 2017.

⁴² Although Mali was not included in the Trump administration’s 2017 travel ban, it was reportedly included on a list of “high-risk” countries that trigger a higher level of scrutiny from officials. Muzaffar Chishti and Jessica Bolter, “The Travel Ban at Two: Rocky Implementation Settles into Deeper Impacts,” *Migration Information Source* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2019). For many years,

Yet the request for a DNA test also indicates that borders have taken on a new function, from a site for political gatekeeping to the collection of forensic data. Activists and social scientists have noted the growing frequency with which DNA tests, medical examinations, and iris scans serve to corroborate or even override narrative and documentary evidence in the management of populations worldwide.⁴³ A fact sheet from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), for example, advertises a new “Biometric Identity Management System” by quoting a forty-three-year-old Congolese refugee Olivier Mzaliwa: “I can be someone now. I am registered globally with the UN and you’ll always know who I am.”⁴⁴ Mzaliwa’s biometric registration in Malawi’s Dzaleka refugee camp is described as “a matter of human dignity” because it safeguards against identity theft and personalizes services. The emphasis, however, is on improvements in operational efficiency for an intergovernmental agency tasked with managing an estimated 20.4 million people.⁴⁵

What distinguishes today’s apparatus of surveillance, diagnosis, and control from the disciplinary techniques of the past is its capacity to produce unique tokens of identification. This

researchers in a number of countries in the Global North have reported higher rates of DNA testing for immigrants and refugees from Africa. See Sarah Morando Lakhani and Stefan Timmermans, “Biopolitical Citizenship in the Immigration Adjudication Process,” *Social Problems* 61, no. 3 (2014): 360–79.

⁴³ Jaeun Kim, “Establishing Identity: Documents, Performance, and Biometric Information in Immigration Proceedings,” *Law and Social Inquiry* 36, no. 3 (2011): 760–86; Mark Maguire, “The Birth of Biometric Security” *Anthropology Today* 25, no. 2 (2009): 9–14; Miriam Ticktin, “How Biology Travels: A Humanitarian Trip,” *Body and Society* 17, nos. 2-3 (2011): 139–58; Didier Fassin, “The Trace: Violence, Truth, and the Politics of the Body,” *Social Research* 78, no. 2 (2011): 281–98; and Heaven Crawley and Dimitris Skleparis, “Refugees, Migrants, Neither, Both: Categorical Fetishism and the Politics of Bounding in Europe’s ‘Migration Crisis,’” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44, no. 1 (2017), 48–64.

⁴⁴ United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees, *Biometric Identity Management System: Enhancing Registration and Data Management*, Division of Programme Support and Management (DPSM) Key Initiatives (Geneva, Switzerland: UNHCR, 2015).

⁴⁵ In 2018, fewer than 5 percent of 1.4 million candidates for resettlement received placements; 3 percent returned to their countries of origin. The vast majority are waiting in camps located in the Global South. *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2018* (Geneva, Switzerland: UNHCR, 2019).

information is not only a means to the ends of administration; it is also an end in itself. Organized into statistical indices of risk, it becomes “biocapital” that can be bought and sold, arbitrated and cashed out.⁴⁶ In other words, information operates not only as a means to power, but also value. The adjudication of an immigration petition disaggregates the elements of a life as units of data. The resulting profile allows for the analysis of particular variables, the relations between them, and their articulation with general trends according to a calculus that seeks to reduce the indeterminacy intrinsic to evaluation. Growing in prevalence throughout the public and private sectors, this process seeks to reduce error and fraud in specific determinations by generating metadata from every decision.⁴⁷ In contrast with the distortions of narrative reporting, metadata (including biometrics) appears real and self-evident.⁴⁸ Thus, as Miriam Ticktin has argued, the body is treated as the locus and necessary supplement to personal accounts that are unreliable at best and generally approached with skepticism.⁴⁹

No single form of forensic evidence necessarily appears more real. In her ethnography of a refugee camp in Tanzania, Liisa Malkki describes a tension in her fieldwork between the

⁴⁶ In his study of genomic research and pharmaceutical markets, Kaushik Sunder Rajan calls “biocapital” a form of speculative capitalism that mobilizes fundamental units of life as information that may be commodified and circulate as currency. Kaushik Sunder Rajan, *Biocapital: The Constitution of Postgenomic Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

⁴⁷ Data profiling is becoming a standard assessment tool in every institutional arena involving population and resource management, from law enforcement and social service provision to communications and marketing. See Jules J. Berman, *Principles of Big Data: Preparing, Sharing, and Analyzing Complex Information* (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Elsevier, 2013); and Bridgette Wessels et al., *Open Data and the Knowledge Society* (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press, 2017). The financial sector has systematically instrumentalized statistical data since the 1970s, when Fisher Black, Martin Scholes, and later Robert Merton introduced an option pricing model that could reliably account for volatility in futures trading. Donald MacKenzie and Yuval Millo, “Constructing a Market, Performing Theory: The Historical Sociology of a Financial Derivatives Exchange,” *American Journal of Sociology* 109, no. 1 (2003): 107–45.

⁴⁸ Katja Franko Aas, “‘The Body Does Not Lie’: Identity, Risk and Trust in Technoculture,” *Crime, Media, Culture* 2, no. 2 (2006): 145.

⁴⁹ Ticktin, “How Biology Travels,” 140.

humanitarian ideal of the refugee as “speechless emissary” and the commitment of her Hutu informants to an emergent living history.⁵⁰ The staff of international organizations depoliticized the circumstances surrounding the crisis with photographs of archetypal victims, childlike from trauma, who required healing through therapeutic intervention. Her informants, on the other hand, participated in “a collective discursive practice, a vital form of social action, configuring and morally weighting virtually all domains of everyday life in the refugee camp, and giving form to the social imagination of exile.”⁵¹ Storytelling was a medium of creative control through which people processed their circumstances and reconstituted a *habitus* together. When Tanzanian officials discouraged this “historico-mythical practice” as a politically hazardous obsession with the past, the refugees responded by sending written testimony to international human rights organizations in protest. This contestation over the parameters of the refugee story was exacerbated by the liminality of the camp, where inhabitants with little chance of international resettlement waited indefinitely to return home.

The institutional plausibility of narrative, disaggregated data, and bodily scars as evidence of trauma depends on their framing in rituals of legal determination. What matters is the juxtaposition of these objects of knowledge within a case. Only narrative assembles the elements of a data profile into a temporal series that is unique to the migrant. This account loses coherence, however, in the boundlessness of objectified data relations. The whole person

⁵⁰ In 1972 tens of thousands of Hutu refugees fled mass killings by the Tutsi-dominated army in Burundi. Most lived in Tanzanian camps for decades, while some settled spontaneously in and around Kigoma township. Since 2005, sporadic repatriations have coincided with ongoing departures. See Human Rights Watch, “*Burundi: Events of 2019*,” World Report 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/burundi#>; Liisa H. Malkki, “Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization,” *Cultural Anthropology* 11, no. 3 (1996): 384.

⁵¹ Liisa H. Malkki, *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology Among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 105.

dissolves into a network of elements that indicate patterns corresponding, in the mind of the analyst, with legal criteria for admission. Thus, it is the material artifact, such as photographic evidence of physical trauma and genetic evidence of kinship, that links the embodied person as a token with the generality of type.⁵² It is collateral—what William Pietz has called a “material consideration”—that secures the contractual relation between the migrant and the state.⁵³

As a property right, citizenship is an entitlement that is justified by law. However, it is not simply a sign of status; it also functions like kinship, positing the necessity of contingent relations. In this way, new relations that are continually being created are also already embedded within a social totality. At the level of the family, the community, and the nation, the processes of law generate their own justification. They create what is discovered as the evidence that confirms the rule because every decision retroactively affirms the constitutive order. As Levi-Strauss argues in *Elementary Structures of Kinship*, law is neither a natural imperative nor a random cultural imposition but an expression of the nature-culture difference itself, a purely formal signifier that indexes contingency.⁵⁴ For example, Africans tend to represent long-term reciprocal relationships in kinship terms, emphasizing the performance of mutual obligation

⁵² Michael Silverstein, “Axes of Evals: Token versus Type Interdiscursivity,” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 15, no. 1 (2005): 5–22

⁵³ William Pietz, “Material Considerations: On the Historical Forensics of Contract,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 19, nos. 5–6 (2002): 35–50.

⁵⁴ “The first form of solidarity adds nothing and unites nothing; it is based upon a cultural limit, satisfied by the reproduction of a type of connexion the model for which is provided by nature. The other brings about an integration of the group on a new plane.” Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 484. Levi-Strauss later articulates this insight in terms of the constitutive excess of the signifier over the signified: “Man has from the start had at his disposition a signifier-totality which he is at a loss to know how to allocate to a signified, given as such, but no less unknown for being given. There is always a non-equivalence or 'inadéquation' between the two, a non-fit and overflow which divine understanding alone can soak up; this generates a signifier-surfeit relative to the signifieds to which it can be fitted.” *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss* (London: Routledge, 1987), 62.

within the collectivity over genealogical specificity.⁵⁵ Contemporary Anglo-Europeans, on the other hand, represent kinship as the organic foundation of relations among individuals, disregarding the co-implication of those relations within a social order that defines individuals as persons.⁵⁶ Like FGC, the “fictive kin” of African families was interpreted by the State Department as evidence of an excess of culture over the nature of science. The “primitive” social organization of mutual care was judged to be ill-fitted to a host society of individual responsibility. Thus, Moctar’s embeddeness in his father’s lineage may have indicated a greater risk of fraud than Mamadou’s long-term separation from a father who had shared his name and signed his birth certificate.

In the language of rights, the repression of contingency drives interpretations of necessity. The humanitarian entitlement to asylum under international law entails a professional obligation on the part of an immigration judge, who disavows his country’s geopolitical investments in the conflict giving rise to the case at hand. Likewise, family immigration represses the contingency of the biological relation in its interpretation of the nuclear family as a natural unit while disregarding grandparents and relations *in loco parentis*, such as Amina’s bond with the teenaged Khady. The institution of citizenship itself presupposes an entitlement to

⁵⁵ Along these lines, John Comaroff describes kinship as a normative ideology that motivates social practice in a dual sense, both by “impelling motion” and by “giving meaning to” the resulting action. Among the Tshidi of South Africa, who manifested both agnatic and matrilineal principles of social organization, relational status was negotiated strategically and then labelled according to received cultural categories. In this way, contradictory tendencies towards hierarchy and egalitarianism were expressed in the relative centralization of politico-jural institutions, which fluctuated depending on internal and external factors. “Domestic relations are always affected by the exigencies of political economy,” Comaroff writes, “just as wider political and economic structures are predicated on the division of labor and the production of value within the household.” John L. Comaroff, “Sui Genderis: Feminism, Kinship Theory, and Structural ‘Domains’,” in *Gender and Kinship: Essays Toward a Unified Analysis*, ed. J. F. Collier and S. J. Yanagisako (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), 71, 83. Also see Jane I. Guyer, “Traditions of Invention in Equatorial Africa,” *African Studies Review* 39, no. 3 (1995): 1–28.

⁵⁶ Marilyn Strathern, *Kinship, Law and the Unexpected: Relatives are Always a Surprise* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 33–49.

membership in a nation-state, repressing the contingency of birthplace through a legal convention that reproduces inherited inequality.⁵⁷ In each of these situations, the individual carries the burden of proof, which may always be called into doubt.

The Impossibility of the Deserving Migrant

Hannah Arendt was not yet famous when she was sent to an internment camp in Southern France, but her ability to find a way out made her feel like a criminal. “Only fame will eventually answer the repeated complaint of refugees of all social strata that ‘nobody here knows who I am,’” she wrote in *Origins of Totalitarianism*, “and it is true that the chances of the famous refugee are improved just as a dog with a name has a better chance to survive than a stray dog who is just a dog in general.”⁵⁸ In a footnote she remarks that the rabble floats to the top in concentration camps. Criminals and “geniuses”—both excluded and exceptional—possess the plasticity and the daring to find opportunity in the violent suspension of law, taking risks while others bear them.⁵⁹ As a singular human being expelled from home, Arendt struggled with the

⁵⁷ “Once the analogy between birthright citizenship and inherited property has been drawn, foundational questions of access, transfer, and distribution become pertinent to the discussion of citizenship’s domain. Although our theories of justice and property allow for unequal accumulation of wealth and other resources, they devote considerable thought to providing justificatory grounds for defending such inequity in the distribution of holdings. More important still for the purposes of our discussion is the recognition that these theories impose significant restrictions on social institutions that generate inequality.” Ayelet Shachar, *The Birthright Lottery*, 17–18.

⁵⁸ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1973), 287.

⁵⁹ Jacques Derrida makes a related observation when he argues that the public fascination with confidence games and successful criminals is motivated by spectacle of the underlying violence of the legal system.

“It is not someone who has committed this or that crime for which one feels a secret admiration; it is someone who, in defying the law, lays bare the violence of the legal system, the juridical order itself. One could explain in the same way the fascination exerted in France by a lawyer like Jacques Vergès who defends the most difficult causes, the most indefensible in the eyes of the majority, by practicing what he calls the ‘strategy of rupture,’ that is, the radical contestation of the given order of the law, of judicial authority and ultimately of the legitimate authority of the State that summons his clients to appear before the law. Judicial authority before which, in short, the accused appears without appearing and claims the right to contest the order of right or law. But what order of law? The order of law in general or this order

guilt of self-preservation. Her predicament manifested a contradiction that lies at the heart of the liberal nation-state, conceived as a universal rule of law authorized by “a people” with a necessarily exclusive membership. The problem was inscribed into the very title of the *Declaration on the Rights of Man and Citizen*: that casual distinction between natural man and political citizen is where the resident noncitizen disappears. Insofar as universal rights can only exist through general political will, natural rights are meaningless.

The paradox involved in the loss of human rights is that such loss coincides with the instant when a person becomes a human being in general—without a profession, without a citizenship, without an opinion, without a deed by which to identify and specify himself [sic]—*and* different in general, representing nothing but his [sic] own absolutely unique individuality which, deprived of expression within and action upon a common world, loses all significance.⁶⁰

Stateless in New York City at the end of the war, Arendt had her doubts about an emergent world order in which human rights were a function of national citizenship. How could a Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) establish an international legal regime on the recognition of abstract personhood? Conflating the rationality of political freedom with the necessity of the body disregards the active historical process through which we create rights. Arendt’s argument is grounded in Aristotle’s distinction between the *polis*, a forum for reasoned debate, and the *oikos*, the household sphere in which economic and emotional needs are met. In order to flourish, political subjectivity has to be protected from the turbulence of private life. Conversely, every person should have access to “the space of appearance in the widest sense of the word, namely, the space where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not

of law instituted and enforced by this state? Or order as inextricably mixed with the State in general?” See Jacques Derrida, “Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority,” in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Anidjar (London: Routledge, 2002), 281.

⁶⁰ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 302.

merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly.”⁶¹ As long as they remain outside the legal protection of any state, refugees exist in a state of obscurity. They are the passive, self-interested recipients of humanitarian goodwill and lack the “right to have rights.” As outsiders they are also implicitly guilty in the eyes of the law, with fewer rights than criminals who are “important enough to be informed of all the details of the law under which [they] will be tried.”⁶²

Arendt is not arguing the state is hypocritical but that it is contaminated. She shares Mary Douglas’s concern with the maintenance of boundaries: the purpose of the state is to uphold the freedom of its citizens, not private property. The problem is “the conquest of the state by the nation,” which grounds political membership in the contingency of birth rather than shared principles of justice and solidarity.⁶³ All politics are local for Arendt, and life is never sacred in itself; it is given value through mutual participation in a shared world that is open to all who are present. Thus, her normative distinction between economic interest, driven by immediate desires, and the inter-subjective mediation of politics is an attempt to insulate the public sphere from the competitive struggle for wealth. “The ‘public good’,” she writes, “is indeed the common good because it is localized in the world which we have in common without owning it.”⁶⁴ As a private good, property should be contained by the *oikos*, which she considered a sanctuary for the regeneration of the person. In this sense, she agrees with Marx that a critical feature of modernity is the alienation of the body and its intimate relations as a form of property to be exchanged. However, her primary concern is not the exploitation of labor but the reduction of all human

⁶¹ Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 198–99.

⁶² Arendt, 287.

⁶³ Arendt, 208.

⁶⁴ Arendt, “Public Rights and Private Interests,” in *Small Comforts for Hard Times: Humanists on Public Policy*, ed. M. Mooney and F. Stuber (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 104.

activity to the collective process of wealth accumulation. Defining the state in terms of sovereignty turns politics into an instrument of private interests rather than a polity as an end in itself. Furthermore, the concept of popular sovereignty is an oxymoron because it subjugates the plural activity of self-governance to the unitary will of rule. Consent to representation is in her eyes the surrender of public responsibility, the first step on a slippery slope towards totalitarianism. A public that retreats from civic engagement into private pleasure runs the risk of “mere life,” contingently subject *to* law rather than the subjects *of* it.

Walter Benjamin did not share his good friend’s romance with the *polis*. For him, law always presupposes the possibility of a lawless death. Whereas Arendt turned to the Greeks for inspiration, Benjamin used the biblical example of the fall from grace to make his point. Death is the sign of a transition from divine potentiality to the actuality of original sin.⁶⁵ From this mythic origin springs the determinacy of language, with which mortal beings judge good and evil and instantiate their judgements with law. This human, law-making power is what Benjamin calls mythical violence. Every legal order—even Arendt’s idealized Greek polity—is both created by and preserved through violence against mere life: drawing boundaries, punishing transgressions, and offering protection as acts that retroactively posit their own necessity.⁶⁶ Whatever its abstract gestures towards justice, the constitutional state is riddled with “unmarked

⁶⁵ “This idea of man’s sacredness gives grounds for reflection that what is here pronounced sacred was according to ancient mythical thought the marked bearer of guilt: life itself.” Walter Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writing*, ed. Peter Demetz, (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), 299. Also see Benjamin, “On Language as Such and On the Language of Man,” and “Goethe’s Elective Affinities,” *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings: Volume 1, 1913-1926* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

⁶⁶ Benjamin, *Reflections*, 295. “For the function of violence in lawmaking is twofold, in the sense that lawmaking pursues as its end, with violence as the means, what is to be established as law, but at the moment of instatement does not dismiss violence; rather, at this very moment of lawmaking, it specifically establishes as law not an end unalloyed by violence, but one necessarily and intimately bound to it, under the title of power.”

frontiers” that any citizen may cross and, like Kafka’s Joseph K. in *The Trial*, confront the possibility of mythical violence, which is state-sanctioned and preserves the law.⁶⁷ Uneven susceptibility to the reduction of bare life explains the formal equality of contract while property accrues to the powerful. “Poor and rich are equally forbidden to spend the night under the bridges.”⁶⁸

Thus, for Benjamin the liberal state is hypocritical because it disavows its theological origins in original sin. Every juridical decision is woven into a cumulative myth of justice that is severed from its foundations. Law is a process that vacillates between law-making and law-preserving violence, maintaining itself as a repetition of ends in which the historical decay of one rootless, self-authorizing structure is superceded by another. Yet the particularity of embodied life cannot be entirely subsumed by this process. It has a liminal relation to the state that is, as Turner put it, “betwixt and between” the means-ends programming of myth and a “politics of pure means” that would break the cycle.⁶⁹ “Mythical violence is bloody power over mere life for its own sake,” Benjamin writes, “divine violence pure power over all life for the sake of the

⁶⁷ Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 296. In her introduction to her edited volume of Benjamin’s essays, *Illuminations*, Arendt repeatedly compared her friend with Kafka, both writers “whose work neither fits the existing order nor introduces a new genre that lends itself to future classification.” In one of many reflections on *The Trial*, Benjamin described Joseph K.’s disorientation before the law in terms of the “physical perplexity” of “modern-day physics” in which the world is not as solid as it appears. This observation was made in 1938, six years after German physicist Werner Heisenberg won the Nobel Prize for his formulation of quantum mechanics based on the uncertainty principle. See Arendt and Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. H. Zohn, ed. H. Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 3 and 141–42.

⁶⁸ Benjamin attributes this quotation to Anatole France. Benjamin, *Reflections*, 296.

⁶⁹ Derrida interprets Benjamin’s metaphysical and revolutionary divinity as the aporetic nature of law itself, which is founded on an internal contradiction between force and justice, justice in law, and justice beyond law. “Its very moment of foundation or institution (which in any case is never a moment inscribed in the homogenous tissue of a history, since it is ripped apart with one decision), the operation that amounts to founding, inaugurating, justifying law (droit), making law, would consist of a coup de force, of a performative and therefore interpretative violence that in itself is neither just nor unjust and that no justice and no previous law with its founding anterior moment could guarantee or contradict or invalidate.” Jacques Derrida, “Force of Law,” 241.

living. The first demands sacrifice, the second accepts it.”⁷⁰ The sacrifice that the state demands is the gift of life to the unity of the nation, which is sustained through war. During truly revolutionary moments, on the other hand, the individual surrenders control over personal ends in an act of faith that escapes the guilt of history.

Arendt and Benjamin agree that by elevating mere life to the theological principle of human rights, the liberal state is a failed attempt to realize universal freedom through law. By conserving a boundary between public world and private interest, Arendt imagines the possibility of an inclusive politics capable of managing the excesses of capitalism. According to Benjamin’s dialectical method, however, such dualities cannot be preserved; the appearance of a paradox—such as peacemaking violence or the legal exclusion of refugees—collapses an opposition into a liminal state that appears as another historical moment. A decade after Benjamin’s 1921 “Critique of Violence,” for example, the emergent Nazi Party violently repressed communism, establishing their authority over the unemployed workers in Germany. In the decades following Arendt’s 1951 *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Cold War policies welcoming defectors from the eastern bloc supported right-wing dictatorships, denying asylum to their refugees. In both of these cases, political violence produced a self-authorizing legal distinction that justified genocidal exclusions.

These mere lives were killed but not sacrificed, according to Giorgio Agamben, because their lives were never acknowledged as sacred in the first place. The subjection of *homo sacer* both exceeds the limit of political legitimacy and regenerates it by demonstrating the absolute power that secures the state. Indeed, this “state of exception” is nothing but the liminal

⁷⁰ Benjamin, *Reflections*, 297.

coincidence of bare life and the sovereign decision.⁷¹ The Plenary Power Doctrine is an example of this zone of discretion, but so is the law-preserving police described by Benjamin. Indeed, by banishing bare life to the threshold of a positive legal order, Arendt and Agamben both miss Benjamin's point that it is precisely this assertion of universal determinacy that is the violence intrinsic to language and law.⁷² The suspension of due process persists with respect to immigrants and refugees not because they are a unique exception but because their exception makes explicit the uncertainty of all human action.

Benjamin's dialectical argument rejects the transcendental idealism of Kant's categorical imperative. For Kant, human beings realize their freedom through the progressive accumulation of knowledge. Yet as Hegel remarks in the *Philosophy of Right*, the owl of Minerva flies at dusk: "History thus corroborates the teaching of the conception that only in the maturity of reality does the ideal appear as counterpart to the real, apprehends the real world in its substance, and shapes it into an intellectual kingdom."⁷³ Benjamin's *Angelus Novus* depicts the triumphalist illusion of a kingdom of ends: the owl has only to look backwards to see the wreckage wrought by the violent myth of law as the power of progress.⁷⁴ In a Kantian framework, law is made possible by bracketing the real. The real is a negative essence beyond positive existence. It is a dark mirror that reflects the image of consciousness back at itself and swallows ambiguity. It thereby appears

⁷¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

⁷² Agamben's misreading of Benjamin is particularly evident in an early essay that was explicitly inspired by Arendt. See Giorgio Agamben, "On the Limits of Violence," *Diacritics* 39, no. 4 (2009): 103–111.

⁷³ G.W.F. Hegel, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008), 16.

⁷⁴ "The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress." The angel of history flying backwards sees the counterfactual possibilities that were foreclosed in the past. Benjamin (1968), "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, 258.

logical that the law should apply to some but not to others. Following Hegel, however, Benjamin does not bracket the real, but treats it as the possibility of conditions for law. Human law is violent because the knowledge of good and evil is never absolute: a specific case is incommensurate with the generic rule, which means that a decision can always be otherwise.⁷⁵ Exclusion is not the problem of a migrant's objective status but of the nation-state's subjective self-determination, which is indifferent to all but its own authority. For migrants, on the other hand, the action of the state is as decisive and as arbitrary as the weather of an increasingly unpredictable landscape.

The contingency of immigration law is evident in its history of service to economic interests. Modern governments equate sovereignty with control over access to national territory. However, this has not always been such a high priority. Throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, migration accelerated to meet the demand for labor. Workers and their families poured into manufacturing centers, as well as the plantations, mines, and forests of colonial territories. "Bad or oppressive laws, heavy taxation, an unattractive climate, uncongenial social surroundings, and even compulsion (slave trade, transportation)," wrote pioneer migration scholar E. G. Ravenstein in 1889, "all have produced and are still producing currents of migration, but none of these currents can compare in volume with that which arises from the

⁷⁵ Carl Schmitt argues that this nonidentity between the generic rule and the particular case creates "juristic chaos" in the absence of the sovereign's power of decision, which grants immanent validity to the law by guaranteeing the "homogeneous medium" of the normal situation. Thus, the law is essentially a "political theology" that must sustain itself with reference to an outside. "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception." For Benjamin, however, the sovereign cannot guarantee the rule of law because the violence of every decision—"the objective contradiction in the legal situation"—invites a counterviolence that undermines the state's monopoly on violence. There is no outside pending the absolute temporal break of divine violence, a theology of revolution, that constitutes a new world. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, trans. George Schwab (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 1–15; Benjamin, *Reflections*, 282–83.

desire inherent in most men to ‘better’ themselves in material respects.’⁷⁶ Capitalism produced both the population and the infrastructure to sustain its own expansion.⁷⁷

With greater mobility, however, regulation became a central preoccupation for many governments. Parallel with the brutal importation of African slaves to the new world were indenture and guestworker programs, particularly for Asians recruited into the colonies. The “assisted laissez faire” policies of settler states, such as the United States and Australia, imposed racial exclusions at varying levels of government while military interventions sought to prevent private recruiters from supplying labor outside accepted channels.⁷⁸ The “imagined communities” of nineteenth-century nationalism were fraught with anxieties of racial degeneration, giving impetus to the projects of social engineering that are today identified with the modern welfare state.⁷⁹ With the “pasteurization” of public health, the scientific state was mobilized against a new and invisible microbial threat. To quote Bruno Latour, “The vague words ‘contagion,’ ‘miasma,’ and even ‘dirt’ were enough to put Europe in a state of siege, and it

⁷⁶ E.G. Ravenstein, “The Laws of Migration,” *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* 52, no. 2 (1889): 286.

⁷⁷ See Adam McKeown, “Global Migration, 1846-1940,” *Journal of World History* 15, no. 2 (2004): 173. Between 1860 and 1914, as many as 80 million rural Europeans moved to cities within Europe, while 52 million moved to the Americas, Asia, or Oceania. Also significant in terms of sheer numbers during this period were an estimated 3.1 million Chinese and 1.3 million Indians migrating to the Americas and Asia. There were significant variations among these inter- and intra-regional patterns, which often involved forced labor and seasonal or temporary work, as well as the expansion or redirection of pre-existing labor markets and long-distance merchant diasporas. Also see Carl Strikwerda, “Tides of Migration, Currents of History: The State, Economy, and the Transatlantic Movement of Labor in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” *International Review of Social History* 44 (1999): 367–94.

⁷⁸ Gerald L. Neuman, “The Lost Century of American Immigration Law (1776-1875),” *Columbia Law Review* 93, no. 8 (1993):1833–1901; Klaus Neumann, “Anxieties in Colonial Mauritius and the Erosion of the White Australia Policy,” *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 32, no. 3 (2004): 1-25.

⁷⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 1983); Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 46–52.

defended itself by *cordons sanitaires* against the infectious diseases.”⁸⁰ Regeneration of the corrupted nation was achieved through the biomedical mediation of people who were uprooted by imperial expansion and the loss of the commons.⁸¹ Thus, sovereign nations began to exercise control over immigration as a form of quarantine.

The container concept of the modern state required a border that could sort value and waste. During and after the First World War, states seized a monopoly over the legitimate means of movement in order to more effectively extract and mobilize resources within a congealing system of states.⁸² Bureaucracies graduated from health screenings to fingerprinting, identity documents, regular census-taking, and public policing. In 1917 and 1924, the U.S. adopted immigration laws that instituted eugenics as a national security issue. Historian Mae Ngai shows how these restrictions produced the “illegal alien” as a negative category of “impossible subjects,” people who—like Arendt’s stateless refugees and Agamben’s *homo sacer*—were bodily present yet legally invisible.⁸³ They become suddenly visible whenever crisis threatens the health of the nation or the stock market.⁸⁴ Thus, today’s migration debates rehearse the

⁸⁰ Bruno Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*, trans. A. Sheridan and J. Law (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 25. “By the turn of the century,” writes Robert A. Nye, “medical outlook of *bio-pouvoir* had thoroughly penetrated popular consciousness. A medical theory of regeneration was so successful in integrating the palpable and familiar litany of social pathologies into a discourse of national decline that it escaped the terminological prison of the clinic and thrived in the arena of public debate.” *Crime, Madness, and Politics in Modern France: The Medical Concept of National Decline* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).

⁸¹ Alison Bashford, ed., *Medicine at the Border: Disease, Globalization and Security, 1850 to the Present* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

⁸² John Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport: Surveillance, Citizenship, and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Aristide Zolberg, “Bounded States in a Global Market: The Uses of International Labor Migration,” in *Social Theory for a Changing Society*, ed. P. Bourdieu and J.S. Coleman (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1991).

⁸³ Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

⁸⁴ Alan M. Kraut, “Foreign Bodies: The Perennial Negotiation over Health and Culture in a Nation of Immigrants,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 23, no. 2 (2004): 3–22; and Howard Markel and Alexandra Minna Stern, “The Foreignness of Germs: The Persistent Association of Immigrants and

politics of the past by taking for granted legal concepts that were invented to describe, evaluate, and contain the boundaries of the state.

The contemporary distinction between migrant and refugee represents a fault line that threatened the balance of power after World War II. Prior to the 1951 Refugee Convention, refugee policies were conceived in terms of work and the prevention of poverty.⁸⁵ Reflecting this sensibility, the 1948 International Declaration of Human Rights acknowledged the incapacity of a rights-bearing individual to exercise autonomy under circumstances of economic hardship.⁸⁶ However, as the United States and the Soviet Union locked horns over the ideological grounds of the postwar world order, skirmishes over the form, content, and institutional stewardship of international norms entrenched the conceptual opposition between civil and economic rights as a matter of political common sense.⁸⁷ Both the Bretton Woods system, initiated by the United States and Britain in 1944 to govern monetary relations, and the United Nations, established the following year to promote political cooperation, were designed to operate as infrastructures that would prevent future conflict and build state capacity. Not incidentally, both these founding conferences were convened in the United States, reflecting its territorial insulation from the war

Disease in American Society,” *The Milbank Quarterly* 80, no. 4 (2002): 757–88. Beyza Mina Ordu-Akkaya, “Migration Policy Uncertainty and Stock Market Investor Sentiment,” *Journal of Capital Markets Studies* 2, no. 2 (2018): 136–47.

⁸⁵ “While the focus on migration was to some extent dictated by the lack of prospects for return or local integration, it also reflected a broader cultural understanding that placed economic poverty at the centre of a European plan for ‘emigration as development.’” Katy Long, “When Refugees Stopped Being Migrants: Movement, Labour and Humanitarian Protection,” *Migration Studies* 1, no. 1 (2013): 11.

⁸⁶ United Nations General Assembly, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, December 10, 1948, 217 A (III), Article 25(1): “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.”

⁸⁷ See Long, “When Refugees Stopped Being Migrants;” Reiko Karatani, “How History Separated Refugee and Migrant Regimes: In Search of their Institutional Origins,” *International Journal of Refugee Law* 17, no. 3 (2005): 517–41.

and its status as dominant partner.⁸⁸ The institutional configuration of “embedded liberalism” to emerge from these negotiations favored a market-based understanding of civil liberties, eclipsing two centuries of political struggle in Western Europe over the relation between political agency and social class.

Human rights and humanitarian regimes emerged in parallel during this period of reconsolidation, motivated by a potent mix of moral urgency and Cold War political competition. The 1951 Convention is an artifact of highly partisan disputes over the postwar refugee crisis, in particular over Russians resisting repatriation. Its narrow scope was designed to recognize a particular kind of individual claim against a particular kind of state. Even with such limited applicability, however, the architects of the refugee protection regime had difficulty convincing states to support the principle of *non-refoulement*.⁸⁹ Their reluctance reflected ambivalence, even at that early stage, about social citizenship as a principle of international human rights.⁹⁰ In the polarizing climate of the Cold War, a model of civil society grounded on the contractual

⁸⁸ See Sam Gindin Sam and Leo Panitch, *The Making of Global Capitalism: The Political Economy of American Empire* (London and New York: Verso Books, 2013); and Stephen C. Schlesinger, *Act of Creation: The Founding of the United Nations* (Cambridge, MA: Westview Press, 2003).

⁸⁹ “*Non-refoulement*” is the legal term of art for the prohibition of expulsion or return: “No Contracting State shall expel or return (“refouler”) a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.” UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, Article 33(1). For a detailed account of the circumstances giving rise to the contemporary refugee protection regime, See Gil Loescher, *Beyond Charity: International Cooperation and the Global Refugee Crisis* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁹⁰ Seminal to this inclusive concept of rights was T.H. Marshall’s 1949 essay, “Citizenship and Social Class,” which considered social citizenship to be the crowning stage in the historical development of the modern state. First, the eighteenth-century revolutions established the individual right to property, personal liberty, and access to justice. The second stage enshrined political rights through the expansion of the franchise to working men, former slaves, and women over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Marshall anticipated that the social rights of the late twentieth century would offer not only opportunities for economic improvement, but also a universal entitlement “to a share in the full social heritage and to live the life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in the society.” T. H. Marshall, *Citizenship and Social Class and Other Essays*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950), 78.

exchange of individual rights and obligations stood in uneasy tension with solidarity-based notions of collective well-being.⁹¹ Liberal democracies distanced themselves from communism by adopting a notion of the “good society” that approached social welfare as an enhancement of mutual self-interest. The opposition of political freedom and economic security discounted the idea, inherited from the socialist tradition, that the deprivations of the few jeopardize the well-being of the whole. Citizenship was construed as an individual property right, a form of personal sovereignty reserved for those who could justify an entitlement based on a contingent claim.⁹² At the same time, the victimization of the Jews during the Holocaust set the stage for a model of reparative justice that granted virtual sovereignty to victims who were only deserving of recognition insofar as they were stripped of the agency to seek redress on their own behalf.⁹³

Thus, parallel refugee and immigration regimes codified Arendt’s distinction between political freedom and economic necessity while simultaneously accommodating capital accumulation. Refugee protection was established as an international obligation, assumed by signatories of the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol as a burden of charity, a form of humanitarian grace.⁹⁴ The model refugee has been granted the right to freedom in a new political

⁹¹ Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon, “Contract Versus Charity: Why Is There No Social Citizenship in the United States?” *Socialist Review* 22, no. 3 (1992): 45–67.

⁹² I mean “contingent claim” in a double sense, both as the consequence of an accident of birth and as a form of property whose value relies on the value of an underlying asset, in this case the geopolitical and socioeconomic status of the country of birth. See Shachar, *The Birthright Lottery*; and Charles Tilly, “A Primer on Citizenship,” *Theory and Society* 26, no. 4 (1997): 599–602. This logic was a break with the doctrine of self-determination, guiding the 1919 Treaty of Versailles and its disastrous minority treaties, which posited ethnic identity as the precondition for citizenship. See Anthony Whelan, “Wilsonian Self-Determination and the Versailles Settlement,” *International and Comparative Law Quarterly* 43, no. 1 (1994): 99–115; and Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

⁹³ Robert Meister, *After Evil* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 113–43.

⁹⁴ As of January 20, 2020, there were 146 parties to the Convention, and 147 to the Protocol. The President of Nauru, Marcus Stephen, signed both the Convention and the Protocol on June 17, 2011, and acceded on June 28, 2011. Madagascar and Saint Kitts and Nevis are parties only to the Convention, while Cape Verde, the United States of America, and Venezuela are parties only to the Protocol, which includes the majority of obligations contained in the original 1951 document. See United Nations High

community because she has been deprived of the grounds for agency in her country. The migrant, on the other hand, is assumed to possess agency. However dire her poverty, she is motivated by private interest, and as such, may be denied the freedom of political membership as a matter of sovereign discretion. The status of migrant workers is underdetermined not because their universal human rights are in doubt, but because human rights are irrelevant to the rationality of supply and demand that governs migrant labor.

For roughly three prosperous decades, this arrangement met the economic and political requirements of the Global North. Without the property right of citizenship, migrants were proletarianized within the “affluent societies” of the postwar boom.⁹⁵ While some consensus was reached at the international level with respect to aspirational standards of human dignity, the more contentious question of economic justice was deferred indefinitely towards a future of global peace and prosperity. Many leading economists were confident that this would come soon, provided that private actors were free to pursue their interests with minimal interference.⁹⁶ Meanwhile, limited numbers of refugees and asylees were admitted from opposing states of the

Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR), *States Parties to the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol*, Geneva, Switzerland, <https://www.unhcr.org>.

⁹⁵ See John Kenneth Galbraith (1958), *The Affluent Society*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company. As historian Mary Ann Glendon recounts, the IDHR left room for choice among a range of means for realizing this goal: “At the national level, welfare principles are sometimes framed as obligations of society and the state rather than entitlements of individuals. With hindsight, it is perhaps regrettable that the framers, in dealing with these provisions, did not adopt the obligation model. To couch the social security and welfare principles in terms of a common responsibility might have resonated better than rights in most of the world’s cultures and would still have left room for experiments with different mixes of private and public approaches.” Mary Ann Glendon, *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (New York: Random House, 2001), 189. For a balanced account of postwar debates over “self-adjusting markets,” see Eric Helleiner, *Forgotten Foundations of Bretton Woods: International Development and the Making of the Postwar Order* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

⁹⁶ Sam Gindin and Leo Panitch, *The Making of Global Capitalism*; Walter W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960).

Cold War *détante*.⁹⁷ Contrary to Arendt’s scenario, refugee admissions under the international human rights regime were an effect of the applicant’s position within this geopolitical configuration, rather than outside it, while the categories deemed voluntary—and therefore an expression of subjective freedom—were decided on the basis of the state’s economic needs.⁹⁸

The demise of state socialism undermined the policy rationale for the refugee-migrant distinction. Today’s “new wars”—drawn out and highly profitable contests among shifting coalitions of non-state actors, foreign governments, political factions, and state bureaucracies—are characterized less by ideological difference or inter-state rivalries than the struggle among interest groups over access to resources. They are often indistinguishable from organized crime.⁹⁹ Displacement is no longer restricted to armed conflicts. Economic inequality, exacerbated by environmental degradation and climate change, creates lucrative opportunities for smuggling, human trafficking, and the exploitation of migrant workers within the lawless zones of the “shadow economy.”¹⁰⁰ Many refugee advocates respond to the reluctance of states to grant

⁹⁷ “Receiving countries could use population flows ‘to discredit both the government or country of origin and to bolster the image of countries granting them asylum.’ In other situations, Cold Warriors could ‘take advantage of refugee movements by arming and training some of the people concerned and using them to destabilize the government within their homeland.’” Julie Mertus, “The State and the Post-Cold War Refugee Regime: Models, New Questions,” *International Journal of Refugee Law* 10, no. 3 (1998): 321–48, citing UNHCR, *The World’s Refugees: In Search of Solutions* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1995), 30, 37.

⁹⁸ Cold War commitments were further codified in the segregation of “social, economic, and cultural rights” from “civil and political rights” into separate Covenants, both drafted in 1954 and adopted in 1966, with extensive reservations in which states positioned themselves along the geopolitical divide. In 1967, a Protocol was adopted to expand the spatiotemporal reach of the Refugee Convention, if not its criteria for eligibility, permitting states to conduct foreign policy through targeted admissions. See Alex Kirkup and Tony Evans, “The Myth of Western Opposition to Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights? A Reply to Whelan and Donnelly,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (2009): 221–38.

⁹⁹ Mark Duffield, *Global Governance and the New Wars* (London: Zed Books, 2001); Mary Kaldor, “In Defense of New Wars,” *Stability* 2, nos. 1 and 4 (2013): 1–16.

¹⁰⁰ Carolyn Nordstrom, “Shadows and Sovereigns,” *Theory, Culture, Society* 17, no. 4 (2000): 35–54; Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

asylum by defending the legal authority of the 1951 Convention.¹⁰¹ “Refugees are not migrants,” announced one UNHCR official in a widely-cited address:

It is dangerous, and detrimental to refugee protection, to confuse the two groups, terminologically or otherwise. In fact it is also not to the benefit of the broader migration debate, as some abuse of the asylum system by illegal migrants colours the public view of migration, giving it a taint of criminality, even robbing it of its positive aspects while tilting the focus towards control.¹⁰²

The “categorical fetishism” of the distinction between forced and voluntary migrant imposes standards that appear nonsensical to petitioners.¹⁰³ While certain appeals to the government require a profile that emphasizes initiative as an indicator of value, others reward powerlessness with a right to life. Today, the “illegal immigrant” bears the guilt of bare life while it is the refugee’s task to express the desire for political freedom by repressing the capacity to act.

Winning the Lottery

Ahmed entered the United States in the back of tractor trailer. “God brought me to Indianapolis,” he told me. He had been in the cold, dark container behind stacks of cardboard boxes ever since the truck left Toronto. He was starving, and the truck driver kindly directed him to an African restaurant. “That was when my life finally began.”

¹⁰¹ The UNHCR has acknowledged in the past that political persecution can take the form of economic deprivation. “Where economic measures destroy the economic existence of a particular section of the population (e.g., withdrawal of trading rights from, or discriminatory or excessive taxation of, a specific ethnic or religious group), the victims may according to the circumstances become refugees on leaving the country.” UNHCR, *Handbook on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status under the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees*, para. 63 (Geneva, Switzerland: UNHCR, 1992).

¹⁰² Erika Feller, “Refugees are Not Migrants,” *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 24, no. 4 (2005): 27.

¹⁰³ Raia Apostolova, “Of Refugees and Migrants: Stigma, Politics, and Boundary Work at the Borders of Europe,” *American Sociological Association Newsletter*, September 14, 2015; and Heaven Crawley and Dimitris Skleparis, “Refugees, Migrants, Neither, Both.”

Ahmed was born in Kaedi, Mauritania. "My ethnic background was as you understand it," he told the asylum court through an interpreter. He was a Haritan slave who was five years old when the military came to take his family away. He was hiding under the bed and stayed there until the next day, when the neighbors came and found him there. They were his family until he was ten, when the local landowner came around to claim him. He slept outside the house in a storage space, with a thatch roof full of holes. He never went to school or asked about it because he knew that slaves were meant for work, not study. He was sent out to an oasis every day with twenty-five camels. If he did not return with all of them, he would get beaten and sent out to find the missing animal. He was usually beaten by the landowner's son, who was three or four years older than he was. The household had many slaves, and young people and children came and went. At fifteen, he watched another boy die from his wounds after a beating. Later, Ahmed was stabbed in the thigh after failing to find a camel that had wandered from the herd. He was injured more seriously, however, when the master's wife struck him with a burning branch.

"Why did she hit you?" asked the government attorney.

"Because I refused to sit in the correct position after bringing her water."

The judge asked to see the scar, and the attorneys gathered around him to inspect his calf.

"Why didn't you tell anyone about the abuse?" the attorney continued.

"The police came around sometimes but I was afraid of them. It was their job to catch people who stole or broke the law, but my owners were the law."

Ahmed told a harrowing story of escape featuring a series of guardian angels that appeared at the right moments. Hassan was a Fulani merchant in the village who had come up to him at the oasis one day and offered to help. When Ahmed was eighteen, he decided to take the man up on his offer. They crossed the river to Senegal in a small boat and went to the market in

San Luis, where Hassan paid a driver to take Ahmed to Gambia. For about nine months, Hassan's business partner let Ahmed work in his restaurant for food and a corner to sleep in. Then a customer, Daniel, invited him to come live in his house and work with him as a street peddler. He let Ahmed make some money of his own, and eventually found a Nigerian to take him to Canada. That person, in turn, found the white truck driver who took him across the US border and all the way to that restaurant, owned by Malian Fulani, who helped him find his family.

That was the magical moment that won him the case, his lawyer, Brian, told me later. The judge wanted to know the details, so Saikou took the stand. He was a city bus driver and had known Ahmed since the day in 2007 when he walked into his brother's restaurant. Saikou had migrated to New York from Mali in 1990 and soon moved to Chicago, where he lived for ten years before deciding that Indianapolis would be a better place to raise children. "I'm not a big city person," he said.

"How did you know who Ahmed was?" the government attorney asked skeptically.

"Well, it turned out that my uncle in New York knew Ahmed's brother, Abdoulay. My uncle had told me Abdoulay's story over the phone, and I thought they might be related because the details were similar."

The judge had Ahmed list the names of his four brothers, two sisters, and two nieces. His siblings had been raised by distant relatives in Senegal. Now they were all living in the U.S. and Canada. The government lawyer insisted that Ahmed could have stayed in Gambia, but the judge had clearly made up his mind. There was some rustling of paper around the absence of a certified translation of Ahmed's birth certificate, but the judge decided it didn't matter and granted Ahmed asylum. Ahmed was dazed with relief.

“What are you going to do now?” I asked him as we left the building. He told me he had been helping out at the restaurant and taking English classes at the community college. He was learning to read and was preparing to take the driver’s exam so that he could become a bus driver, like Sekou. Eventually, though, he wanted to go to college. “I want to learn about the human rights. I want to fight slavery in my country.”

“When you win one of these cases, you feel like you won the lottery,” grinned Brian. The afternoon Ahmed and Sekou came to his office, they shared a version of the story containing all the facts that were presented to the court. Nevertheless, certain details about Ahmed’s extraordinary resourcefulness had not made the cut. Brian had had a bad experience the month before with a case that had not gone so well. Sidiki and Nagna were a couple from Guinea who had been in removal proceedings for having overstayed their tourist visas. They had each been to hell and back, but they had not applied for asylum within the deadline of a year after entry. Sidiki had been tortured and nearly killed for his involvement in the campaign to elect opposition leader Alpha Condé. Nagna had been sold into involuntary domestic servitude by her father as part of a business deal, to a man with a first family who kept her in a shed and raped her repeatedly. Sidiki and Nagna fled Guinea together, and their young daughter had been born in the U.S. This led the judge to insist on a medical report documenting Nagna’s FGC. Brian had found an expert witness to testify about political violence in Guinea, but he could not find anyone in the area who could testify that Sidiki was who he said he was. “It’s really hard to prove that someone *isn’t* lying,” Brian said. Without supplementary confirmation of Sidiki’s identity, the judge did not find his extensive scarring relevant to the case. Then, even with the threat of FGC on the record, the family was deported.

Brian was stunned, though it was the kind of case that could have gone either way. “It was ugly,” he told me. “The judge and the government lawyer aggressively cross-examined Sidiki on his political history as a way to discredit him, and in the process, they discredited Nagna as well.” It was as though Nagna didn’t have a case of her own. Even worse, the well-being of their U.S. citizen child did not appear to figure at all in the decision. This did not make sense because while asylum relies on proof of the migrant’s powerlessness, cancellation of removal hearings hinge on the suffering that deportation would cause others who rely on the migrant’s agency.¹⁰⁴ The law did not work the way it was supposed to, leaving Brian uncertain about his ability to effectively represent his clients.

His anxiety was put to the test when Amina’s friend Jemma was put into removal proceedings. Jemma had been at O’Hare airport on a routine errand to pick up a shipment from her sister in Mali—textiles that she sold in her hair-braiding shop to help support her family abroad. The customs official didn’t like her accent and told her so. Then she called immigration. “It happens all the time,” Brian told me. “These days everyone’s an immigration official. Customs officials, suburban cops checking green cards at stop lights.”

This had not always been the case. Since the early 1980s, Chicago had been at the forefront of the sanctuary movement, when churches began providing shelter to Central Americans fleeing violence that was supported by the U.S. government. Their inability to obtain asylum undermined the legitimacy of immigration law, galvanizing coalitions between religious communities and advocacy groups that sustained decades of activism. In 2006 and 2012, a few

¹⁰⁴ Waivers to certain grounds of inadmissibility are available for lawful permanent residents whose deportation would cause “extreme hardship” to a U.S. citizen or lawful permanent resident spouse, fiancé, or parent. A higher standard of “exceptional and extremely unusual hardship” is applied to irregular migrants in removal proceedings. Immigrant and Nationality Act of 1952, 8 USC §1229b, *Aliens and Nationality, Cancellation of Removal; Adjustment of Status*, 2012.

months after Jemma’s hearing, the city council passed ordinances reiterating its policy of noncooperation with immigration enforcement.¹⁰⁵ Yet Brian told me that he had just handled two cases in which clients had been put into removal proceedings after routine traffic stops.

In order to convince the judge to cancel Jemma’s case, Brian was going to have to demonstrate that deportation would cause “exceptional and extremely unusual hardship” to her eight-year-old son Hamza, who had been born in the United States. He decided that it would be advantageous to present Jemma as a single mother, Hamza as a model child, and Mali as a particularly dangerous destination for both of them. This was not a difficult case to make considering the recent Tuareg rebellion near Jemma’s ancestral village of Embori in the north of the country. Jemma had been physically present in the United States since 1998 and had never been convicted of a crime. In addition, Hamza’s school principal and soccer coach were recruited as character witnesses. The key testimony in Jemma’s hearing was Hamza’s plea that his mother be allowed to remain in the country. A bright, curious child, Hamza was stoic and anxious about his role, shedding quiet tears during our preparatory meeting in the lawyer’s office. On the stand, he performed his genuine fear with poise and effectiveness. Brian had coached him well with a range of possible questions, as well as body language, eye contact, and most importantly, what *not* to say. He had to avoid mentioning the undocumented members of his family: not only his father Segu, with whom he had lived since birth, but also his older brother Kamo, born in Mali, whose vision impairment might raise public charge concerns. Actually, Jemma’s deportation would be even more detrimental for Kamo. The differential legal value of the people in his

¹⁰⁵ The 2016 presidential election raised the stakes of Chicago’s sanctuary policy. When the Trump administration attempted to withhold federal funding, Mayer Rahm Emmanuel sued the Justice Department, winning an injunction that was upheld by the 7th Circuit Court of Appeals in April, 2018. Kore Rumore, “Chicago’s History as a Sanctuary City,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 23, 2019.

family was not lost on Hamza. He had to be the star of the show because he was the only one with an undisputed right to stay.

Contributing to the strength of the case was an affidavit, transcribed and translated by Amina, in which Jemma described her experiences of FGC and forced marriage to a much older cousin at the age of fifteen. “The judge would have to have a heart of stone not to see the merit of this case,” Brian told me. “I don’t think we’ll need to get photographs of her scars, at least not yet.” She was to deny that she was still in communication with family members in Mali. “There is nothing for me there,” she agreed.

Brian was worried that the judge might doubt Hamza’s actual identity as Jemma’s son due to a clerical error made by Cook County Hospital on the day of his birth. Because of Jemma’s poor English, the nurse had taken her friend’s name as the infant’s mother. The friend had returned to Africa and could not be reached for an affidavit, and though a DNA test had been taken, the state had yet to release the results. “Sometimes they see situations like this as holes in the overall credibility of the case. Even if the proof comes later, it makes a bad impression when it counts most.” He had seen families divided, children deported, clients sent back to prison, torture, even death. He did not know if Jemma’s and Hamza’s story would “sell” in that particular court at that particular time. Then there was the logistical question of the quota on the number of permanent residencies allotted to cancellation defendants each year.

What Brian found so unnerving was a mixed message from many adjudicators, government officials, even social service providers. Buried in their goodwill was a seed of contempt towards what cannot be known with certainty. The incapacity of government to

guarantee outcomes generates the bad conscience of resentment, however compelling the case.¹⁰⁶ This invests the event of adjudication with the existential ambiguity of a religious ritual, which appeals to an agency beyond the limit of reason. However truthful the communication, its metapragmatic dimension severs the form from its content, distancing the actor from her intentions as well as their outcomes.¹⁰⁷ Interpreted as a success, Jemma would be singled out as sacred in her suffering and salvation. Yet those who are approved may also, like Arendt, feel guilt rather than gratitude for such an uncertain gift. In addition, those who are denied might enjoy the “*ressentiment* of those beings who, denied the proper response of action, compensate for it only with imaginary revenge,” a sense of identity rooted in a moral state of injury.¹⁰⁸ There is a third possibility as well: a position of ambivalence towards the determination, even when the tokens of trauma cash out and things get back to normal.

Fortunately, a sympathetic judge, a strong case, and an available visa converged to produce a happy ending for Jemma and her family. After receiving a green card, Jemma was finally able to visit her family in Mali for the first time in fifteen years. Brian also helped her file a petition for Kamo’s adjustment of status just short of his eighteenth birthday. But Segu

¹⁰⁶ On interactions between authorities and petitioners for benefits from the state, see Jaeun Kim “Establishing Identity;” A. Gilboy, “Deciding Who Gets In: Decisionmaking by Immigration Inspectors,” *Law and Society Review* 25, no. 3 (1991): 571–600; Marjorie S. Zatz and Nancy Rodriguez, “The Limits of Discretion: Challenges and Dilemmas of Prosecutorial Discretion in Immigration Enforcement,” *Law and Social Inquiry* 39, no. 3 (2014): 666–89; Patricia Ewick and Susan S. Silbey, *The Common Place of Law: Stories from Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); and Kaaryn Gustafson, *Cheating Welfare: Public Assistance and the Criminalization of Poverty* (New York: New York University Press, 2011).

¹⁰⁷ Jan Blommaert, “Investigating Narrative Inequality: African Asylum Seekers’ Stories in Belgium,” *Discourse and Society* 12, no. 4 (2001): 413–49.

¹⁰⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University of Press, 1994), 20. As Wendy Brown notes, emancipation predicated on “states of injury” is subject to the grace of government, however legitimate one’s claims. “Whether one is dealing with the state, the Mafia, parents, pimps, police, or husbands the heavy price of institutionalized protection is always a measure of dependence and agreement to abide by the protector’s rules.” *Politics of Injury* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 169.

remained a fugitive from deportation, and their hair braiding business had yet to recover from the post-recession slump. Hamza's school was one of many schools unexpectedly closed on the south side of the city. Gang violence seemed to be getting worse, and reports were mounting of police brutality and racial profiling. During a visit one afternoon at their shop on Seventy-ninth Street, Jemma told me that if they could afford it, they would move to a safer neighborhood. "Sometimes I think about sending the boys to Bamako to live with my mother. Soon it may be better there than here. Who knows?" She planned to apply for citizenship as soon as possible so that she could both stay *and* leave, sponsor relatives, support her community, and keep her options open. "Immigration isn't about rights or belonging, or any of that," Segu said. "It's in God's hands or it's a matter of luck, depending on who you talk to." It was about playing your hand well and keeping your head whatever comes next.

Herein lies the impossibility of the deserving migrant, who is either the subject of a sovereign decision who must earn a living, or the subject of economic progress by accident of birth, wealth, and circumstance. If the good migrant is admissible and the bad migrant is inadmissible, the cancellation of removal is the double negation, the not inadmissible migrant whose bodily evidence and traumatic testimony indexes the good faith that grounds any contract. In exchange for the "right to have rights," Arendt expects the stranger to exercise the obligations of full membership in the democratic polity. But what if citizenship is less a matter of rights and obligations than a property that provides access to opportunity? Equipped with a portfolio of options, not only "geniuses and criminals" but everyone in between must hedge risk across the unpredictable limits of the state. Most Africans are familiar with the paradox of an arbitrary rule of law, whatever its incarnation or location. If Jemma had won the right to live her life in

America by virtue of her African vulnerability, she also faced the everyday hardships of life in America with the skepticism and resilience that came with being African.

When Joseph K. seeks advice on how to address the court in Kafka's *The Trial*, a court painter, who has inherited his authority from his father, describes three possibilities. A definite acquittal is an ideal that is never achieved in practice; an ostensible acquittal is always subject to reversal; and an indefinite postponement prevents a determination from ever being made.¹⁰⁹ The definite acquittal is the fate of Agamben's *homo sacer*, for whom every act is deemed unlawful. Arendt's stateless refugees are subject to ostensible acquittal when rights are extended and retracted at the whim of host states or the international community. It is indefinite postponement, however, that best describes the non-position of Joseph K. and those of my informants who live with the fear of potential expulsion. Following Arendt, Agamben has argued that "by breaking the identity between the human and citizen and that between nativity and nationality, [the refugee] brings the originary fiction of sovereignty to crisis."¹¹⁰ This critique of human rights posits bare life as both the constituting exception of liberal capitalism and its crisis. Therefore, the nation is actualized, in such a critique, as a crisis-ridden totality. However, perhaps it is not the refugee, the victim of misfortune, but the diversity visa lottery winner, the victim of good fortune, who is the most symptomatic group in contemporary politics.

One of the Trump administration's key targets, the Diversity Immigrant Visa, is available to a random selection of applicants from countries with relatively low rates of immigration. The program emerged, improbably, during a moment of transition in immigration policy as the Cold War was coming to an end. It was a last-minute addition to an omnibus immigration bill passed

¹⁰⁹ Franz Kafka, *The Trial* (New York: Schocken, 1999), 152–60.

¹¹⁰ Giorgio Agamben, "Beyond Human Rights," in *Means without End: Notes on Politics* (Minneapolis, MN and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 93.

in 1990 after years of fruitless debate over the question of employment-based immigration.¹¹¹ Employers were pushing for greater flexibility in hiring foreign-born workers, especially in information technology, which demanded a highly-specialized workforce, and agriculture, the most poorly paid sector of the economy. Labor unions and immigrant rights groups pushed back. The former wanted retraining and better pay rather than replacement by foreign workers; the latter rejected any “guest work” program that would anchor short-term residency to a single, potentially exploitative employer.¹¹² The growers were effectively neutralized for yet another round of the debate, while the temporary H1-B Visa for skilled workers was capped for the first time in its thirty-eight-year history.¹¹³ Congress also appeased restrictionists by adopting a proposal by Irish and Italian interest groups who hoped to “correct” for the demographic transformations caused by the 1965 abolition of nationality-based entry quotas.¹¹⁴ The “diversity

¹¹¹ I summarize here Anna O. Law’s detailed account of the diversity visa’s tangled political history in “The Diversity Visa Lottery: A Cycle of Unintended Consequences in United States Immigration Policy,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 21, no. 4 (2002): 3–29.

¹¹² Between 1942 and 1964, Mexican farm workers worked legally in the United States under the auspices of the Mexican Bracero program, a temporary foreign agricultural worker program established initially to meet World War II labor shortages. U.S. agricultural producers employed more than 400,000 foreign workers a year during the Bracero program’s peak in the last half of the 1950s. Since its sunset, however, the majority of the seasonal farmworkers in the U.S. have been undocumented, mostly from Mexico. See Kitty Calavita, *Inside the State: The Bracero Program, Immigration, and the INS* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

¹¹³ The 1990 law set an annual limit of 65,000 H-1B visas and also imposed a labor attestation requirement on employers. The tug-of-war over H1-B visa allocations has continued. In 2004, Congress added 20,000 additional visas for foreign nationals with master’s degrees. Universities and research organizations are exempt from the cap, as are H-1B holders who are renewing their visas or changing employers. Denial rates have increased significantly in 2019, a trend attributed to the Trump administration’s procedural strategy to prevent immigration. Louise Radnofsky, “Approval Rate Declines for H-1B Visas,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 23, 2019. For a discussion of the labor abuses associated with the program, see Julie R. Watts, “The H1B Visa: Free Market Solutions for Business and Labor,” *Population Research and Policy Review* 20, nos. 1-2 (2001): 143–56.

¹¹⁴ Following the 1965 Hart-Celler Act, the number of Latino and Asian petitions quickly exceeded those of Western Europeans, who were unwilling to follow earlier generations of co-nationals across the Atlantic. See Aristide Zolberg, *A Nation by Design: Immigration Policy in the Fashioning of America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

visa” was intended by its founders to *reduce* the racial diversity of foreign workers for whom there was a steady demand. Jewish and Evangelical groups were also rewarded with an amendment to refugee law establishing a legal presumption of eligibility for Jews and Christian minorities from the former Soviet Union and Southeast Asia.¹¹⁵ Thus, amidst the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the restructuring of the global political economy, conflict between employers and restrictionists created a vacuum to be filled by a nostalgic fantasy for a return to pre-war immigration.

Though the early years of the program reflected much participation by Eastern Europeans from the former Soviet Union, Africans quickly emerged as the real winners of the lottery.¹¹⁶ Many factors converged to create this demand. The diversity lottery appeared on the horizon just as the backlash against postcolonial immigration in Europe was beginning to build momentum.¹¹⁷ While cheap airfare and communication technologies brought the Americas closer to potential migrants, both private and public sector employers stepped up recruitment in poor countries for cheap talent. By 2000, early lottery winners and H1-B recruits who had managed to

¹¹⁵ Shortly after the passage of Lautenberg Amendment, the U.S. denied refuge to thousands of Haitians fleeing political violence following the military overthrow of democratically-elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide. See Thomas David Jones, “Haitian Refugee Center, Inc. v James Baker, III: The Dred Scott Case of Immigration Law,” *Penn State International Law Review* 11, no. 2 (1992): Art 2. The policy remains in effect, despite allegations of bias. See Miriam Jordan, “Soviet-Era Program Gives Even Unoppressed Immigrants an Edge,” *New York Times*, August 26, 2017. On the political history of U.S. refugee admissions, see Kathryn M. Bockley, “A Historical Overview of Refugee Legislation: The Deception of Foreign Policy in the Land of Promise,” *North Carolina Journal of International Law and Commercial Regulation* 21, no. 1 (1995): 253–92; and Maria Cristina Garcia, *The Refugee Challenge in Post-Cold War America* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017).

¹¹⁶ As of 2018, the diversity lottery accounted for only about 5 percent of the roughly 1 million green cards awarded annually, with as many as half going to Africans in recent years. Racial bias has been a prominent theme in calls to eliminate the program, particularly by the Trump administration. See Carly Beth Goodman, *Global Game of Chance: The U.S. Diversity Visa Lottery, Transnational Migration, and Cultural Diplomacy in Africa, 1990-2016* (PhD diss., Temple University, 2016).

¹¹⁷ Etienne Balibar, *We, the People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

obtain permanent residency became eligible to petition family members, increasing the visibility of emigration as a mobility strategy in Africa.¹¹⁸ Anyone with a high school diploma might qualify for a diversity visa, as long as their country is eligible and their application is legitimate.¹¹⁹ The program's creators characterized lottery winners as "new seed immigrants," independent individuals who "simply wanted to come to the United States not because of family relations or work skills, but because of their pioneering spirit and immigrant work ethic."¹²⁰ Thus, unlike humanitarian, family, and work visas, this program required no rationale for migration and promised no support, public or private. In its emptiness it was pure possibility that, as Charles Piot has demonstrated, gave rise to a vigorous "popular economy" of legal, financial, and personal services that facilitated the application process for anyone willing to pay the price.¹²¹ The visa lottery necessitated a currency of improvisation beyond the legal language of rights.

I met Efe in the Frankfurt airport on the way back to Chicago from an international conference. I noticed her the moment I arrived at the gate: a small, dark-skinned woman in a bright green jacket, tight jeans, and an "I love New York" t-shirt. A little boy of about five or six

¹¹⁸ Though Africans represent only 4 percent of the U.S. foreign-born population, they are the country's fastest-growing immigrant community, tripling since 1990. See American Community Survey, U.S. Census Bureau, <http://www.census.gov/acs/www/>; and Mary Mederios Kent, "Immigration and America's Black Population," *Population Bulletin* 62, no. 4 (2007): 1–16.

¹¹⁹ With some exceptions, those born in territories that have sent more than 50,000 immigrants to the United State in the previous five years are not eligible to receive a diversity visa. For 2021, those countries included: Bangladesh, Brazil, Canada, China (mainland-born), Colombia, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, India, Jamaica, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, Philippines, South Korea, United Kingdom and its dependent territories (except Northern Ireland), and Vietnam.

¹²⁰ Law, "The Diversity Visa Lottery," 12–13.

¹²¹ "Indeed this system might be read as a partial solution to Togo's development impasse, for it serves as a remittance magnet, drawing millions of dollars annually from the diaspora back home. Moreover, it has a significant spillover effect, redistributing monies along networks of kin and friends and supporting entire cottage industries of document fabricators, photographers, those apprenticing winners into trades, doctors administering the medical exams, and the entrepreneurs themselves." Charles Piot, *Nostalgia for the Future* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 86–87.

stood beside her, his back against the counter, staring without expression at the people around him. He was wearing a parka and cradling a Micky Mouse backpack. Efe was struggling to communicate with the attendant, who was fluent in German and English, but didn't speak a word of French. I offered to help.

She'd never been on an airplane before and was nervous about her luggage. She had checked it in Accra and wasn't sure if she was supposed to pick it up somewhere. "I'm going to Chicago to get married!" she exclaimed. I told her that her bags should arrive in Chicago on their own and promised to help her find baggage claim when we landed. Then I asked her name. She paused before saying "Charlotte," not because she was suspicious of my intentions but because it took her a moment to remember her French name. This and more came out over the course of our transatlantic flight together. She was thirty-two years old and had lived her entire life in an Ewe village near the Ghanaian border. The boy's name was Fafa, and he was not her child.

"Isn't he burning up?" I said at one point, and tried to help him remove the parka, but he just pulled it more tightly around him.

"His mother gave it to him," Efe said. She was sympathetic but formal with him, like a grade school teacher. We were coming over Lake Michigan when I finally uncovered the nature of their relationship.

Efe met her fiancé Kojo at a market in Lomé, fourteen years ago. She was behind a table selling plastic sandals. He was looking for shoes for his mother, or so he said. "He told me her feet were the same size as mine. Then he made me sit down so that he could try every style out on me." She giggled when she said this, as though his behavior was a bit risqué. He was from Ghana but was visiting family in Togo; in fact, they quickly discovered that they had family in common. He let her fall in love with him before telling her that he actually lived in Chicago and

would be returning in less than a month. Efe became a highlight of his annual visits, and two years later they had a daughter. She wanted to go back to the United States with him then, but he wouldn't hear of it. He said it was too dangerous, too cold, too far from home. He never neglected his financial obligation to them, and during his visits they would talk about marriage and immigration, but his promises never materialized. Eventually, Efe decided to take matters into her own hands. With the help of her family, she paid a broker to help her file an application for the diversity visa. "It cost too much, really," she said. "When I didn't win, I felt like I'd wasted our money. But that got me started." Once the application was prepared, it cost her nothing to resubmit it the following year. Again no luck.

Meanwhile, Kojo had decided that it was time to bring their daughter to Chicago. "I cried for a week after she left," Efe said, glancing at Fafa. The boy had fallen asleep with his face pressed against the window. "He was right that she was never going to get an education in Togo." She took out her wallet and showed me a picture; the resemblance was unmistakable. "Her name is Rose. We talk every week. But I didn't tell her I was coming! We decided to make it a surprise." Her excitement was irrepressible, in contrast with the mute passivity of her traveling companion. She hadn't seen her daughter in two years. "She's twelve now. Almost a woman. She needs her mother."

Kojo had not returned the previous summer, explaining that the bad economy had made money much too tight. She would have been angry and distressed by the evaporation of his financial support if she hadn't finally won the lottery. "I told him that I was coming myself, and that there was nothing he could do to stop me." Efe's announcement changed everything. "Suddenly he was full of ideas and money! I was nervous because I never finished the *bac*. The man who helped me with the application told me to put down that I was a house painter. I

thought that was stupid but I followed his directions. I told Kojo about that, and he told me not to worry. He talked to some people in Lomé, and I got papers saying that I started painting houses when I was 12!” Kojo also promised friends in Chicago that he would have Efe bring Fafa to them. “I was even more nervous about that, but I knew people who had done it. Besides, it seemed like the right thing to do.”

Efe didn’t tell me how much Fafa’s family paid for his passage. Perhaps she didn’t know. She may have been the one to play the lottery, but Kojo was in charge now. “I need to call him right away,” she kept saying. “The flight’s late and he’s been waiting for my call.” I reassured her that there would be plenty of time to contact Kojo once we were on the ground. She had two carts worth of luggage, amply wrapped in shrink wrap. She was noticeably relieved—even surprised—that everything had arrived intact. Once through customs, she sat down on the first available bench and changed her high heels for a glittering pair of flip-flops. “Now I’m ready for Chicago!” she beamed, rooting around in her giant pocketbook. She pulled out a little black address book. “This is the number I call from Togo.” We tried it with my phone but there was no answer. “He drives a taxi,” she told me. “He told me to ask for Taxi Number 4519.”

The more we talked, the more her anxiety began to surface. She had never lived with Kojo before, and she wasn’t sure how it would go. She didn’t have people here, and everything was so different. She didn’t even have a phone to call her family, though Kojo said he’d get her one. After sleeping for most of the seven-hour flight, I would have expected Fafa to act restless, but he contained his curiosity with almost supernatural obedience, like another piece of luggage. I worried about how much Efe was going to have to depend on her husband and gave her my number. I told her that she should call me if she had any questions or if things didn’t turn out the

way she wanted. She told me she was grateful, and that she understood what I was getting at. I never heard from her again.

Adverse Possession

Diadie's case was complicated, that much was clear. I could see it on the lawyer's face. I had not met either of them before, but Amina had filled me in, and I knew a cancellation of removal hearing was scheduled for the following day.

"Did you bring the pictures?" He asked the three of us, as though we were a single multilingual unit. Amina murmured gently to Diadie, who pulled a sealed envelope out of her big leather purse and placed it gingerly on the edge of the desk. Amina picked it up and passed it over the vast mahogany surface.

"The doctor took them?" He slipped it into the file. "And the report cards?"

Those he examined closely, nodding appraisingly, lifting his eyebrows in surprise. "They are doing well. Especially the older one...."

"Kabu," Amina reminded him. She was not impressed with this lawyer. He had not seemed adequately prepared during their previous two meetings; he was retired and had agreed to take the case *pro bono*. She was worried for Diadie, who did not speak a word of English despite nearly fourteen years in the United States. Amina had known her for many years and had urged her to learn to drive and open a bank account, but it made Diadie nervous to interact with English speakers, or even deviate from the narrow circuit of homes, shops, and mosques with which she was familiar. She earned a decent living for her family as a hair braider, but she had depended completely on her husband to manage her affairs. Now her husband was in jail, and the family's future was in jeopardy.

“How many children do you have?” the lawyer asked.

“Five,” said Amina.

“No, you need to translate and let her answer. We’re practicing for court tomorrow.”

Amina repeated the question in Bambara, and Diadie said “five” in uncertain English.

“No. Let Amina answer for you. You don’t want to give them the impression that you are lying about your English skills. Why haven’t you learned any English?”

There were dark circles under Diadie’s eyes, and she was clutching her bag as though she might drop it. She told the lawyer that she could not read or write, and as I had discovered in the waiting room, she spoke even less French than English.

“Her children are teaching her,” Amina told him, impatient with his awkward courtside manner, his incapacity to reassure his client. Diadie’s four sons were born in the United States, and the oldest had just won a scholarship to the state university. She had left her daughter behind in Bamako, many years ago.

“Diadie didn’t come to Chicago seeking asylum,” Amina continued. “She was born in a small village in Mali, about two hours east of Bamako. Her father had three wives in two small rooms, in a clay compound with a mud yard.”

“No electricity. No running water.” The lawyer wrote these words in the margin of her typed deposition, which had been prepared by Amina. Amina had given me a copy as well. It didn’t share much about Diadie’s childhood other than that she had spent most of it in her mother’s brother’s house in another, slightly larger village nearby. She had not gone to school, though the boys in her family went to a madrassa. She would go on certain days with the other girls to recite and memorize the Koran. When she was about eight or nine years old, her uncle’s

wife took her on a long trip with five other girls. They had started early in the morning and walked all day. She was excited because she had never traveled anywhere before.

The lawyer tapped on the envelope with the pictures and asked Diadie to describe her FGC experience in detail. “No doctor,” he wrote at the end of the paragraph. “Was there an anesthetic or antibiotics?” he asked. “Didn’t she tell me that she had a sister who died as a result of a circumcision?”

“It was a cousin, my uncle’s daughter,” Diadie replied through Amina. Diadie was married six years later. One of her uncle’s friends had seen her in the house during a visit and decided he wanted her. Her uncle told his friend to bring some salt as a dowry, and then a cow, and their marriage was sealed. Diadie made a face when Amina mentioned this, and laughed a little. “I was a servant in that house.” Diadie wanted to be sure that Amina repeated her correctly. Shortly afterwards, Diadie’s husband migrated—she didn’t know where—and she was left alone with his other wives. She began picking fights with them because she wanted to leave. Her labor belonged to them, but she had never wanted to be married to this man. When she finally left one morning, her aunt was not happy to see her. They threatened not to feed her and to throw her out if she didn’t go back where she belonged. She fled again to the home of a childhood friend in a neighboring village, and this was where she met Boh, the father of her children. He had been saving for some time to buy papers to cross; he had a cousin in Chicago. They began to plot their escape.

“And then she got pregnant,” the lawyer scribbled in, with an arrow to designate the turning point in the narrative. “Boh left on a jet plane,” Amina continued interpreting for Diadie. “He promised to send for her. Then her daughter was born in Bamako, where she was staying with yet another friend.” There was a cluster of annotations here: Why Bamako? Friends? Job?

Amina explained to the lawyer that Diadie had wanted to have her baby in a hospital where it was safe, but it was uncomfortable living with her friend and her friend's husband in a crowded city apartment. She had stayed much too long; it took almost three years for Boh to buy her a visa to enter the United States.

“Was he your husband?” the lawyer asked. “I mean, did you actually marry him?”

Amina didn't even bother to consult with Diadie to answer that one. “She was already married. We don't get divorced in our religion. We don't just go off with the man of our choice.” But Diadie had done just that. She had left her daughter behind with Boh's family in order to start over again. It was not clear why she had not taken her baby with her. She would not say, and Amina refused to press her.

This was not going to be an easy case to make. First, most of Diadie's family remained in Mali, which implied a safety net. They were angry with her for rejecting their arranged marriage, but they did not represent a threat. Second, her evidence of FGC was not likely to further her hardship claim, since the children who would return with her to Mali were boys. There was also that unfortunate luck of the draw: the judge was one of the least sympathetic in the Chicago Immigration Court, a man who frowned on the appearance of children in court. And then there was the problem of their father, who had just been sentenced to six years in prison and would certainly be deported upon his release.

“If they ask anything about it,” the lawyer advised us, “she should just tell them that she doesn't know. They want to know what kind of person she is.”

Suddenly, Diadie began to laugh. How could any of us know anything about her? It seemed as though this process had everything and nothing to do with her. The lawyer's questions indicated that he was not interested in any information that did not fit the profile of a successful

cancellation case, and that there wasn't much of that. The most formidable challenge, however, was her guilt by association with a prosecuted felon. No wonder the lawyer was flustered. Willful, headstrong, opinionated, the protagonist of her story had already claimed a right to have rights over her own body by resisting her family's demands. She had proven herself to be a "creature of want and desire," a self-possessing individual better classified as a "voluntary migrant" than a target of sympathy.¹²²

Evidence of agency was particularly damaging to Diadie's case because it implied that she was less her husband's servant than his partner, and therefore potentially his partner in crime. Boh first arrived in Texas in 1998 on false tourist documents, then moved to Chicago where he purchased new documents and sponsored Diadie on a fiancée visa. They opened a hair braiding shop in the suburbs with a combination of earnings, family investments, and an *ésusu* loan.¹²³ Staffed by Diadie and a fluctuating stream of family and friends, the business did well, and after a few years Boh was able to buy a house for his family in Bamako. He became a leader of his community in Chicago, his home a place for new arrivals from Mali and Senegal to get their footing before setting out on their own. Boh's niece, Fanta, was one of many young women who

¹²² Stephan Palmié, "Thinking with Ngangas: Reflections on Embodiment and the Limits of 'Objectively Necessary Appearances,'" *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 48, no. 4 (2006): 855–57, FN 7. Palmié notes that according to the Cartesian notion of the self-possessed cogito, the evidence of bodily subjection implies the deprivation of a property right over the self. Historically, this has been a feature associated with primitives, slaves, children, and women. "Since the deployment of their bodily capacities for the creation of value was already entailed in someone else's property rights (masters or husbands, fathers, and legal wardens), their persons were subsumed under the appropriating capacities of others who—legally speaking—represented or 'corporately' entailed them."

¹²³ See Chapter 1 (FN 54) on rotating credit associations, widely referred to by the Yoruba word *ésusu*. In 2018, Nigerian-born Abbey Wemimo and his business partner Samir Goel launched a financial technology platform called Esusu that allows users to pool and withdraw money for big-ticket transactions. "The fintech company also doubles as a rental data reporting service by partnering with landlords, property managers, public housing authorities, and consumers to report tenants' rent payment history, one of the most sizable and consistent payments for Americans." Ruth Umoh, "Minority-Owned Fintech App Esusu Closes \$2.3 Million Seed Round, Announces Plans to Address Credit Inequality," *Forbes*, August 26, 2020.

came to work with them. Born in Boh's natal village, Fanta had migrated when she was twenty years old following an arranged marriage with Cissé, a Malian cab driver who lived in New York. Cissé's brother had stood as a proxy groom during the wedding, and upon arrival in the United States, Fanta discovered that her husband was older and less financially stable than expected. He also had a drinking problem, and when he became violent, she left him and began supporting herself as a hair braider. A few years later, Boh and Diadie invited her to move to Chicago where she could help with the housework, work in the shop, and double the remittances to her parents and eight siblings in Mali. Two years after that, she met someone new and was planning a wedding. She was driving back from her fiancé's house in Indiana when her car broke down on the interstate and she was killed by a tractor trailer.

Boh was confident enough of his standing in the United States to hire a lawyer to sue the trucking company, and confident enough of the diaspora network to enlist the logistical support of Harune, a friend of the family who spoke English well. He offered to translate and assist with the case in exchange for 35 percent of the proceeds. "I could have told them not to trust that man," Amina told me sadly. "But by the time I became aware of the situation, it was too late." An uncle of Amina's ex-husband Cheik, Harune was a man of higher lineage who looked down on Boh and his family. When he discovered that the plaintiffs could win millions in damages, he changed his demand to 50 percent. Fanta's parents, who had been given a visa to travel to Chicago for the settlement, were distraught by his behavior, and they tried to work through their conflict with an imam. When negotiations broke down, Harune went to New York and brought Fanta's estranged husband, Cissé, into the picture. "The family didn't consider Cissé a party to the lawsuit," Amina explained, "because he hadn't been part of her life for years. He hadn't even attended her funeral. It was her parents and her sisters that mattered. Boh was representing their

interests, but Harune didn't care about anyone but himself." Expecting the court to appoint Cissé as sole executor, Harune contacted the trucking company's attorney and triggered an investigation into Fanta's marital status. A charred document salvaged from the burned wreckage of Fanta's car was scrutinized and found to be a marriage certificate; then Fanta's father produced a Malian divorce certificate that was determined to be fraudulent.

The judge initially refused to admit evidence relevant to the distribution of the settlement, and the jury found Fanta's life to be worth \$5 million. Following a posttrial evidentiary hearing, however, the court reversed the wrongful death verdict, absolving the trucking company of both liability and damages, and finding Boh, Fanta's family, and Cissé guilty of fraud. "I don't care how poor or how terrible it is in Mali," remarked the judge in the court record:

Arguably, that's evidence against them. They come from a corrupt country. That's in the record. We're well aware, and the Court can take judicial notice of what's going on in North Africa there, and that's all the byproduct of corruption and a lack of property rights in that country, a lack of due process, a lack of respect for courts and judicial systems, which apparently has been brought across the Atlantic here by these two families. They don't seem to have much respect for the integrity of this Court, and I think perhaps it's a byproduct of their culture and their society and the poverty that's there.

Amina found it ludicrous that Boh and Cissé should have been treated as conspirators, since it was Cissé's intervention that had led to the revocation of the verdict. The Illinois Court of Appeals agreed, but it interpreted Cissé's strange absence from the proceedings as evidence not of indifference but of victimization. Cissé wound up settling with the trucking company for \$60,000, while Boh, his lawyer, and Fanta's family were sued for \$1.8 million in monetary sanctions. Then Boh was indicted for having lied about the marriage.¹²⁴

¹²⁴ Details of this case are taken from the Illinois Appellate Court decision. Citation may be provided on request; I omit it here to protect the identity of my informants.

By all accounts, Boh's prosecution was riddled with irregularities. When Boh and his attorney arrived in court for a hearing on the sanctions motion, he was arrested and presented with a bond hearing instead. "I'm not quite sure that I'm prepared to—to proceed on the sanctions request at this time," the judge informed them. "I—I have some other thoughts in mind about it. And I know that comes as a bit of a surprise for you, perhaps, but they're not civil in nature." The question of whether Boh knew about Fanta's marriage was deferred to the criminal trial, yet Boh was taken directly into custody before the complaint had even been filed. When his attorney requested a continuance on the bond hearing so that he could find a colleague in criminal law to take the case, the judge replied that Boh would not be released until someone posted bail. The new attorney promptly requested a new judge, as required by statute, and objected that retaining the trucking company's attorney as prosecutor in the criminal case constituted a conflict of interest, particularly considering the pending monetary sanctions. The first motion was denied on a technicality, and the second granted. However, when the Cook County State's Attorney's Office refused to take the case, the court appointed a private attorney as special prosecutor.¹²⁵

Boh was sentenced to six years in prison, an unusually harsh penalty for a contempt case. Comparing the crime to residential burglary, the judge emphasized Boh's violation of the court's trust: "When you burglarize and commit the same sort of acts within a residence, you violate the sanctity of a home and that's tantamount to what's occurred here in violating the sanctity of a court and a court proceeding and, in essence, violating or abusing, I should say, the right of free access that persons are given to come into courthouses."

¹²⁵ Illinois criminal statute provided for the appointment of a special prosecutor under circumstances in which the State's Attorney was for some reason unable to attend, *not* because the office had declined to prosecute.

The meeting that I attended with Diadie and her lawyer took place shortly after Boh's conviction. For nearly a year, Amina accompanied Diadie as she took up her husband's logistical responsibilities with their business and household. Boh spent nearly a year in state prison before being released on bond while the Illinois Appeals Court considered his request for a new trial. Two years after his conviction, the court threw out the judgment, validating repeated objections by Boh's attorney that the judge had violated the separation of powers and his client's right to due process.¹²⁶ It was further noted that Boh had not been provided with an interpreter during the trial, and that there was no basis for the finding that Fanta's family had conspired with him to defraud the court. However, Boh's guilt was neither affirmed nor denied. That question was remanded to the Circuit Court where it was suspended, along with the monetary sanctions, when the county indicated that it would not pursue a retrial. Further, the case would not be referred to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS).¹²⁷ Following this partial resolution of Boh's appeal, Diadie's cancellation of removal was finally granted after having been extended twice. The immigration judge attributed his decision to the intensification of sectarian violence in central Mali.

At the end of the ordeal, Diadie's family was both more and less secure. The cancellation case had provided her with a green card four years before her oldest son reached the age at which

¹²⁶ Boh's appeal raised a number of issues, arguing (1) the evidence presented was insufficient, (2) the trial court erred in admitting certain evidence, (3) the trial court appointed prosecutors with a personal and/or financial interest, (4) the trial court erred in denying Boh's motion for substitution of judge as of right, (5) the trial judge was biased, (6) the trial court violated the separation of powers, (7) the special prosecutor amended the charging instrument without Boh's knowledge, (8) the special prosecutor engaged in misconduct, (9) the jury instructions were defective, (10) Boh received ineffective assistance of counsel, (11) the trial court considered impermissible factors in sentencing Boh, and (12) Boh's sentence was excessive. The appeals court found the right to substitution of judge to be sufficient cause to overturn the ruling and limited its analysis to that issue.

¹²⁷ On September 7, 2011, the Cook County Commissioners reinforced Chicago's sanctuary policy by adopting Ordinance 11-O-73, which prohibits sharing of information with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

he could petition for his parents. She now had the means to sponsor her daughter in Mali as well as her husband.¹²⁸ However, the ambiguous outcome of Boh's highly-publicized criminal case could be taken as a ground of inadmissibility when Diadie sponsored him for residency. Indeed, he could be arrested and deported at any time. Gone were the days of quiet existence under the radar, when an undocumented migrant could earn belonging with patience and time.¹²⁹

In the decade between Fanta's death in 2007 and Boh's release from prison in 2017, immigration policy in the United States had undergone a gradual shift from a governing logic of legalization based on categorical eligibility to a security logic of law enforcement. Mae Ngai and Nicholas De Genova have both noted that "illegality" is a product of the law.¹³⁰ The threat of deportation operates as a disciplinary technique, compelling undocumented migrants to accept low wages, dangerous working conditions, and everyday anxiety as the price of the opportunity to sell their labor. De Genova considers border enforcement to be a grandiose performance of power which fetishizes "illegal aliens" while obscuring their exploitation. In other words, the antinomy of inclusion and exclusion is a spectacle that posits the border as a limit while repressing the infrastructure for which the border is a channel. For De Genova, less visible technologies of surveillance and control are an extension of this "magic trick" through which the

¹²⁸ A legal permanent resident can sponsor unmarried adult children under the age of twenty-one. Citizens, on the other hand, can sponsor children of any age, regardless of marital status, as well as siblings. If she had not attained a green card, her son might have eventually petitioned for his sister as well, though this is the last preference category with a long wait for a visa.

¹²⁹ Generations of transnational mobility and a reliance on undocumented workers gave rise to contradictory requirements and tacit accommodations by the state that facilitated the legal legibility of undocumented immigrants. For example, amnesty and legalization processes required proof of continuous residence in the United States, including tax returns and utility bills bearing false names and social security numbers. See Susan B. Coutin, "Denationalization, Inclusion, and Exclusion: Negotiating the Boundaries of Belonging," *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies* 7, no. 2 (2000): 585–93; and Linda Bosniak, *The Citizen and the Alien*.

¹³⁰ Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 47; Nicholas P. De Genova, "Migrant "Illegality" and Deportability in Everyday Life," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31 (2002): 419–47.

state essentializes “the juridical inequalities of citizenship and alienage as categorical differences that may be racialized.”¹³¹ I argue, on the contrary, that the involution of immigration enforcement as a domestic security issue indicates a departure from the cost-benefit analysis of foreigners as commodities. Under financialization, the state treats migrants less as units of human capital than as potentially toxic assets.

While the association of immigrants with national insecurity is nothing new, the attacks of September 11, 2001, marked a new era in the conceptualization of threat. With its relocation from the Department of Labor to a newly formed Department of Homeland Security, the immigration bureaucracy became an intrinsic component of a security apparatus dedicated to the preemption of risk.¹³² The “war on terror” motivated the widespread adoption of forecasting methodologies developed in environmental and military sectors to cope with— and profit from— logistical uncertainty.¹³³ Unlike predictive strategies that rely on a baseline equilibrium from which to compute possible deviations, scenario planning envisions multiple future worlds that are actionable in the present. Policies are designed not just to mitigate but to manage risks, calculated according to the interaction effects of unpredictable variables within complex

¹³¹ De Genova, “Spectacles of Migrant ‘Illegality’: The Scene of Exclusion, The Obscene of Inclusion,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36, no. 7 (2013): 1181.

¹³² On post-9/11 applications of preemptive risk management, see Joseph Masco, *The Theatre of Operations: National Security Affect from the Cold War to the War on Terror* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); and Richard V. Ericson, “The State of Preemption: Managing Terrorism through Counter Law,” in *Risk and the War on Terror*, ed. L. Amoore and M. De Goede (London: Routledge, 2008).

¹³³ Melinda Cooper, “Turbulent Worlds: Financial Markets and Environmental Crisis,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 27, nos. 2-3 (2010): 167–90. Louise Amoore has called governance under financialization a “politics of possibility,” which relies on imagining options rather than the techniques of probability and prediction characteristic of modern governmentality. Louise Amoore, *The Politics of Possibility: Risk and Security Beyond Probability* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

systems.¹³⁴ As long as undocumented immigrants were subjected to the categorical logic of exception, they were bare life, publicly excluded yet privately included for purposes of exploitation. However, outsourcing and the progressive automation of manual labor have reduced dependence on irregular migration in the digital economies of the Global North, while anxieties surrounding the austerity politics of financialization have found expression in racism and xenophobia.

Immigrants are a sign of the state's inability to contain the international flow of capital. Financial accountability and the mitigation of risk became central to immigration policy discourse in the 1990s.¹³⁵ Today, investment analysts are attuned to the impact of immigrants on labor markets, international trade, foreign investment, and the demand for financial services, as reflected in a growing emphasis on financial interventions in development discourse.¹³⁶ Less explicit but equally relevant to financial markets is the expansion of immigration enforcement and detention worldwide, much of it conducted through private security agencies.¹³⁷ The political

¹³⁴ An example of scenario planning is Limor Samaimian-Darash's ethnography of Israel's public health administration. "Governing through Time: Preparing for Future Threats to Health and Security," *Sociology of Health and Illness* 33, no. 6 (2011): 930–45.

¹³⁵ Kathleen M. Moore, "U.S. Immigration Reform and the Meaning of Responsibility," *Studies in Law, Politics and Society* 20 (2000).

¹³⁶ "Along with the absolute number of workers, an economy's growth potential is also a function of the quality of those workers. Workers with more education, better training, and superior skills increase the productive capacity of the economy more than lower-skilled workers. In this regard, highly-skilled immigrants can be helpful in supporting the economy, particularly if they are innovative." Manning and Napier, "The Economic Impact of Immigration," *Market Commentary*, March 11, 2019. For a summary of finance-oriented development discourse, see OECD, "Strengthening the Links Between Migration, Investment, Financial Services and Development," in *Interrelations Between Public Policies, Migration and Development* (Paris: OECD, 2017).

¹³⁷ See Michael Flynn and Cecilia Cannon, "The Privatization of Immigration Detention: Towards a Global View, Global Detention Project," (Working Paper, Geneva, Switzerland, 2009); and Denise Gilman and Luis A. Romero, "Immigration Detention, Inc.," *Journal of Migration and Human Security* 20 no. 10 (2018): 1–16. For a review of anthropological literature on the "security-economic nexus," see Susan Bibler Coutin, "The Rights of Noncitizens in the United States," *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 7 (2011): 289–308.

preoccupation with border control coincides with the integration of global information systems and the perpetual threat of market collapse. It is no coincidence that the decade following the 2007 financial crisis and the U.S. Treasury's unprecedented absorption of bad private debt has been characterized as migration crisis and a source of sociopolitical anxiety.¹³⁸

Simultaneously limit and channel, boundary and bridge, borders are both created and disrupted by the flow of money, goods, and people, creating opportunities for arbitrage. Migrants are perceived as parasites in the triple sense elaborated by Michel Serres: as interference or noise in a channel; as an infection that enters and alters the social body; and as a guest without an entitlement to stay.¹³⁹ Serres emphasizes the ambivalence inherent to each of these characterizations. Interference both distorts and improves communication; in breaching boundaries, noise energizes, strengthens, and expands capacities. Infection is integral to life within an ecosystem, as much symbiosis as threat. And hospitality towards the uninvited guest is the rule of the gift, a general standard of good behavior and insurance against war.¹⁴⁰ Moreover, the state and its private sector beneficiaries are parasitic on the migrant. The border is where the migrant confronts state agents who interfere with their subsistence strategies and infect their networks with fear and danger. It is not only the migrant but also the state that is an arbitrageur of the border, entitled to simultaneously prevent passage and channel foreign labor and capital

¹³⁸ For comprehensive treatment of the politics surrounding the financial crisis, see Adam Tooze, *Crashed: How a Decade of Financial Crises Changed the World* (New York: Viking, 2018).

¹³⁹ Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence R. Schehr, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

¹⁴⁰ On the genealogy of immigration as hospitality, see Vincent Chetail, "Sovereignty and Migration in the Doctrine of the Law of Nations: An Intellectual History of Hospitality from Vitoria to Vattel," *European Journal of International Law* 27, no. 4 (2017): 901–22. Also see Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality*, trans. R. Bowlby (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000); and Michel Agier, *The Stranger as My Guest*, trans. H. Morrison, (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2021); and Serres, *The Parasite*. I discuss the question of hospitality in Chapter 3.

into its sphere of control. The state profits politically from representations of the border as a site of vulnerability that is easily penetrated by foreign bodies of questionable origin. Meanwhile, information extracted from migrants forms part of an emergent cross-border infrastructure of political and financial securitization.

Emboldened by plenary power and the political will of the Trump administration, ICE became a laboratory of experimentation with data harvesting and profiteering. Detention and deportation provide billions of dollars in business to the prison, transportation, and security industries, as well as bail bond and money transfer companies, telecommunications, health care, food services, and in particular, the technology sector. In August 2018, the Department of Homeland Security awarded a defense contractor \$113 million to carry out the Visa Lifecycle Vetting Initiative, which would determine visa applications automatically based on biometric and biographic profiles. These profiles would be enhanced by algorithmic scanning of “contextual information” such as social media accounts.¹⁴¹ The resulting database would form part of a Customs and Border Patrol Intelligence Records System currently in development, aggregating immigration, law enforcement, national security, and other forms of public information within a cloud-based infrastructure that has machine learning capabilities.¹⁴² These developments indicate that executive policies, such as travel bans and additional documentation requirements for entrants from certain countries, are not only an expression of cultural bias; they are also early

¹⁴¹ Chinmayi Sharma, “The National Vetting Enterprise: Artificial Intelligence and Immigration Enforcement,” *Lawfare*, January 8, 2019.

¹⁴² United States Department of Homeland Security, “DHS/CBP/PIA-010-Analytical Framework for Intelligence (AFI),” <https://www.dhs.gov/publication/analytical-framework-intelligence-afi>.

steps in a shift towards preemptive assessment. Is a migrant likely to become a “positively contributing member of society” or will a migrant “commit criminal or terrorist attacks”?¹⁴³

The diagnostic value of “big data” is not limited to national security; it is also the raw material for the measurement and management of financial risk. This parallel practice of securitization pools various types of contractual debt into assets that may be sold to third-party investors and traded in financial markets. Securities provide the seller with access to liquid capital without surrendering the underlying contract or property; buyers collect regular payments on the original loans, as well as interest rates and capital gains. Once they are rated by credit agencies based on the value of their collateral and the probability of default, financial assets are priced by algorithms that calculate risk according to indices of nominal value. Some indices track price fluctuations of underlying collateral by asset class. For example, online broker Motif Capital has developed a thematic index called “Data-Driven World” for investors seeking to capitalize on innovations in information technology.¹⁴⁴ Other metrics draw on external data to predict the fluctuations themselves, such as a policy uncertainty index to gauge the impact of migration-related anxiety on market performance.¹⁴⁵ Securities both hedge and exploit volatility via arbitrage and speculation. In this way, the circulation and reproduction of wealth both drives

¹⁴³ McKenzie Funk, “How ICE Picks Its Targets in the Surveillance Age,” *New York Times*, October 3, 2019.

¹⁴⁴ “The Motif Data-Driven World Index is designed to deliver exposure to companies with common equity securities listed on exchanges in certain developed markets that may benefit from the on-going rapid increase in electronically recorded data in the world and its impact on the lifecycle of data delivery and processing. This lifecycle includes the recording, transmission, storage and processing, securing and analysis of data.” The index identifies and weighs the market risk of companies in five categories: Internet of Things, Data Infrastructure, Big Data, Cybersecurity, and Artificial Intelligence. Motif has also developed custom indexes for institutional investors in a number of other thematic areas, including National Defense, Human Evolution, and Manufacturing Revolution, which anticipates the technology-driven emergence of new processes, products and energy sources. See <https://www.motif.com/products/custom-indexes>.

¹⁴⁵ Scott Baker et al., “Immigration Fears and Policy Uncertainty,” *VOX*, Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR) Portal, December, 15, 2005, http://www.policyuncertainty.com/immigration_fear.html.

and is driven by the circulation and reproduction of information. Within the emerging “finance-security” regime, personal preferences, everyday practices, and social relations are digitally captured and securitized in both senses of the word: as a form of knowledge that manages the threat of future uncertainty through the quantification of present risk.¹⁴⁶

The financialization of security and the securitization of finance determines the value of an individual’s insecurity. Authorities at every level of government are adopting digital technologies to manage risk rather than interpret evidence. Criminal justice scholars have brought attention, for example, to how electronic profiling techniques in everyday policing subverts the reasonable suspicion standard—traditionally determined case-by-case with narrative and forensic evidence—by promoting data-driven speculation of future guilt.¹⁴⁷ Similarly, recent studies document the impact of risk modeling and biometrics on the administration of anti-poverty programs.¹⁴⁸ ICE is already taking advantage of these emergent information systems to identify, locate, and deport undocumented migrants. As long as undocumented workers were the invisible surplus of the categorical binary between foreigner and citizen, they were allowed to participate on a limited basis in public services such as hospitals, schools, and community policing without fear of reporting to the immigration authorities. In recent years, however, privacy and public safety considerations have been overruled by the “legitimate interests” of

¹⁴⁶ Marieke de Goede, “The Finance-Security Assemblage,” in *Speculative Security: The Politics of Pursuing Terrorist Monies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

¹⁴⁷ Andrew Guthrie Ferguson, “Big Data and Predictive Reasonable Suspicion,” *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 163, no. 2 (2018): 327–410.

¹⁴⁸ Virginia Eubanks, *Automating Inequality: How High-Tech Tools Profile, Police, and Punish the Poor* (New York: Saint Martin’s Press, 2018); Sarah Valentine, “Impoverished Algorithms: Misguided Governments, Flawed Technologies, and Social Control,” *Fordham Urban Law Journal* 46 (2019): 364; and Ed Pilkington, “Digital Dystopia: How Algorithms Punish the Poor,” *The Guardian*, October 14, 2019.

national security, connectivity, efficiency, and profitability.¹⁴⁹ Accordingly, “firewalls” among government agencies and between public and private entities have been gradually dismantled, deterritorializing borders so that populations may be sorted at points of institutional interface, with varying levels of scrutiny.¹⁵⁰

It was in one such an institution, a Dallas hospital, that Thomas Eric Duncan became a national health emergency. A tourist with U.S. citizen relatives, he had entered the United States as an invited guest. That status was retroactively revoked, however, in reaction to a risk factor that rendered Duncan bare life in the eyes of all states. The carrier of a hidden virus, he was found to have violated the principle of transparency, the capacity to enter into contract on which the legitimacy of the liberal state is based. The appearance of an infection out of place triggered the purification response of the security apparatus that manages the boundaries of territory and law.¹⁵¹ Like the civil disorder with which Ebola was associated, Duncan became the personification of Africa as threat, infecting public discourse with the repressed memory of historical complicity in the suffering of slaves and Africans abroad. Those cracking down on Duncan’s image participated in a decontamination ritual that erased these traces of disorder and abjection. Their “legitimation work” performed sovereignty as a necessary fiction by criminalizing what cannot be controlled.¹⁵² Representational thought manages its conceptual

¹⁴⁹ Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (New York: Public Affairs, 2019), 487–88; Margaret Hu, “Big Data Blacklisting,” *Florida Legal Review* 67, no. 5 (2016):1735–1809; and Daniel J. Solove and Danielle Keats Citron, “Risk and Anxiety: A Theory of Data-Breach Harms,” *Texas Law Review* 96 (2018): 737–86.

¹⁵⁰ Angela Stuesse and Mathew Coleman, “Automobility, Immobility, Altermobility: Resisting the Intensification of Immigrant Policing,” *City and Society* 26, no. 1 (2014): 51–72; and François Crépeau and Bethany Hastie, “The Case for ‘Firewall’ Protections for Irregular Migrants,” *European Journal of Migration and Law* 17 (2015): 157–83.

¹⁵¹ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 36.

¹⁵² This discussion owes much to Susan Bibler Coutin et al., “In the Mirror: The Legitimation Work of Globalization,” *Law and Social Inquiry* 27, no. 4 (2002): 801–43.

framework by banishing the excess of contingency to its threshold. The self-authorizing nation appears in sharp relief against its constituting exception, a rabble of opportunistic, irresponsible or fanatical others.¹⁵³ The idealized legal subject and the caricatured threat are both concrete abstractions, symptoms of the indeterminate practices and social relations that keep people, property, and information in motion. They are ideological currency, circulating in an infrastructure that only appears when it fails, presenting problems—bankruptcy, epidemics, expired visas, identity theft—that demand judgment.

Duncan's presence in the United States suggests any number of stories. It could be said, for example, that his tragic arrival mirrored his country's fate as a fallen utopia. Africa's oldest republic, Liberia, was founded on the ambivalent intentions of a humanitarian movement that sought to relocate non-slaves of African origin from an American constitutional democracy that had failed to abolish slavery. Duncan's life was shaped by the failure and forgetting of that project and the political interventions that would follow.¹⁵⁴ He had been forsaken by his country, as my friend Lucien described him, a motherless child who had spent most of his life in refugee camps. Another story could be told about the virus itself, which used Duncan's body as a vector to spread the chronic disease of unjust enrichment, which has ravaged public health systems in

¹⁵³ See Paul Ruda, *Hegel's Rabble* (London: Continuum, 2011).

¹⁵⁴ Settled by the American Colonization Society in 1821, Liberia was an icon for both abolitionists and racists as a destination for freed slaves from the United States; it would later become a key foothold for American interests in West Africa. With support from the CIA, military dictator Samuel Doe staged a bloody coup in 1980 that secured control of the government for almost a decade before the end of the Cold War created a power vacuum that plunged the country into fifteen years of conflict. Along with its equally fraught neighbor, Sierra Leone, which had been colonized by freed slaves under the British empire, Liberia would become a fulcrum of violence and predation, exporting billions of dollars in black market diamonds and timber in a self-perpetuating economy of war. See Nemata Amelia Blyden, "'Back to Africa': The Migration of New World Blacks to Sierra Leone and Liberia," *OAH Magazine of History* 18, no. 3 (2004): 23–25; Jonny Steinberg, *Little Liberia: An African Odyssey in New York City* (Capetown, SA: Johnathan Cape, 2011); and Mariane C. Ferme, *Out of War: Violence, Trauma, and the Political Imagination in Sierra Leone* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018).

the United States as well as Africa.¹⁵⁵ The Texas hospital's inadequate response to Duncan's illness could be explained in terms of incompetence and insensitivity, or the limitations of a defunded and privatized system that relies blindly on technological solutions to complex problems. The reduction of Duncan's circumstances to the "bad choice" of boarding a plane during an epidemic configures him as an unfree agent with all the responsibility of self-possessing subjectivity.¹⁵⁶ Therefore, his postmortem criminalization refuted a personal sovereignty he had never enjoyed. He was both less and more than the sum of his story, a dividual person identified with the virus, on one hand, and inseparable from his family, friends, and Liberians abroad, on the other. The crisis that was Duncan made African migrants a problem. Yet his case was also a "toxic asset" that could be leveraged as the story of a threat averted by heroic risk-takers rather than as evidence of pervasive systemic risk.

Like Duncan, Fanta was subject to postmortem assessment as an unfree agent. Fanta's family had already established a legal claim when doubts regarding their "good moral character" undermined their standing. Their journey through the court system traversed boundaries of tort, contract, criminal, and immigration law. The initial lawsuit sought civil liabilities under the Illinois Wrongful Death Act, which allows damages "for the exclusive benefit of the surviving spouse and next of kin of [the] deceased person." The law further specifies that any monetary award should be distributed by the court "according to their level of dependency on the deceased

¹⁵⁵ The only two cases of Ebola contracted in the U.S. during the 2014 epidemic were nurses who had cared for Duncan at Texas Health Presbyterian Hospital. Both women recovered, though Nina Pham would later sue the hospital for their poor response to the situation, which compromised both Duncan's odds of survival and her protection from infection. The suit was settled for an undisclosed amount. Emanuella Grinberg, "Texas Nurse Who Contracted Ebola Settles Hospital Lawsuit," *CNN Health*, October 24, 2016.

¹⁵⁶ Coutin et al., "In the Mirror," 826.

person, as determined by the court's assessment of the circumstances.”¹⁵⁷ As Fanta’s “personal representative,” Boh was able to convince the jury of her Malian family’s pressing need for compensation. Yet even at this stage, the trucking company challenged the legitimacy of the case by arguing that Fanta had committed suicide, a strategy that succeeded in reducing the award by \$750,000. The defendants’ initial attempts to undermine the family’s beneficiary status were initially rebuffed by the court; two judges ruled that the distribution of benefits was irrelevant to a finding of liability. However, following the jury verdict, the trial judge decided to consider additional evidence and then vacate the judgement altogether, not because the trucking company was blameless, but because the entire family was undeserving of damages.¹⁵⁸

Although the civil and criminal counter-complaints to stem from this reversal were technically unrelated to the family’s immigration status, the judge characterized Fanta’s relatives as perpetrators of a conspiracy against the U.S. justice system. Fanta “got the golden egg laid by the goose” when she came to the U.S., he concluded. Though she exercised autonomy by leaving her arranged marriage, the judge suggested that her family drove her to suicide by sending her to live with a stranger. “They arranged a marriage, and they arranged a fraud,” he remarked for the record. Boh, whom he accused of negotiating behind the scenes with Cissé, was not “someone who has the interest of her estate in mind, someone who would seek out the true beneficiary of her estate, true, proper parties in interest.” And who might that be? Cissé, who was “sly as a fox,” was taken to task for failing to “vindicate her rights” by assuming the role of administrator from the outset, though the court never questioned that it was Fanta’s parents and siblings, not

¹⁵⁷ Illinois Wrongful Death Act: Civil Liabilities (740 ILCS 180), Ch. 70, Paragraph 2, Section 2(a).

¹⁵⁸ The Illinois Court of Appeals absolved Cissé of the “formal findings of fraud,” arguing that he should have been permitted to amend the complaint. By then, however, Cissé had already settled with the trucking company for \$4,190,000 less than the jury verdict.

her estranged husband, who were dependent on her earnings. In focusing on the facticity of Fanta's marriage, the judge transformed a straightforward tort case into an indictment of the plaintiffs' personal decisions, a finding that carried over into Diadie's immigration case due to her testimony on behalf of her husband.

It could be argued that the court's punitive response to Fanta's ambiguous marital status, like the criminalization of Duncan's border crossing, instantiated bureaucratic power through the "conquest of illegibility."¹⁵⁹ Yet neither of these cases actually applied the law. On the contrary, both allegations of fraudulent intent were themselves fraudulent. Ironically, Fanta and Cissé's marriage would not have passed the strict scrutiny of an immigration adjudicator. Struggles over the interpretation of evidence in family petitions have historically sought to determine the sincerity of family relations; fiancés and spouses may be required to demonstrate an authentic relationship through photographs, affidavits, and interviews in which they are quizzed about household possessions and consumption patterns.¹⁶⁰ Boh's attorneys built his defense on the assumption that the civil court would share this disapproval of "the purchase of intimacy," presenting expert witnesses that spoke to the prevalence of emigration-based proxy marriages in Mali.¹⁶¹ Yet this strategy backfired. The judge defended the letter over the spirit of the Wrongful Death Act, fetishizing the "smoking gun" marriage certificate over Fanta's demonstrated

¹⁵⁹ James C. Scott, *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

¹⁶⁰ See Kim, "Establishing Identity;" Piot, *Nostalgia for the Future*; Ticktin, "How Biology Travels;" Susan Bibler Coutin, "Contesting Criminality: Illegal Immigration and the Spatialization of Legality," *Theoretical Criminology* 9, no. 1 (2005): 5–33; David Kyle and Christina A. Siracusa, "Seeing the State Like a Migrant: Why So Many Non-criminals Break Immigration Laws," *Illicit Flows and Criminal Things: States, Borders, and the Other Side of Globalization*, ed. W. van Schendel and I. Abraham (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005); and Kitty Calavita, "Immigration, Law, Race, and Identity," *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 3 (2007): 1–20.

¹⁶¹ Viviana A. Zelizer, *Purchase of Intimacy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 225–26.

financial commitment to her parents and siblings. In this case, the apparent legibility of the marriage contract foreclosed on the dependencies of Fanta's actual life.

The transformation from Fanta's straightforward wrongful death case to Boh's convoluted criminal case entailed a shift from the reparative logic of tort law to the binding agreement of contract. In his historical analysis of Anglo-American property law, William Pietz demonstrates how these two forms of liability emerged in response to the expansion of capitalist enterprise, which generated an antinomy between the profitability of competitive markets and the stability of property ownership.¹⁶² Likewise, the duty to protect the contract rights of private individuals conflicted with the social good. According to Pietz, these two contradictions were mediated by a "forensics of capital," material evidence that established the social fact of a legal obligation.¹⁶³ Contracts generally require a surety in order to formalize a promise between individuals. This "material consideration" establishes an agreement that will be enforced by the court in the event of a violation. Torts address the loss of a life as a "negatively lived object" by repairing social relations through compensation.¹⁶⁴ This legal relation is caused by a material violation and ends with an agreement. The monetary valuation of human life is not a price in the contractual sense; it is an artifact of feudal property relations that limits the expansion of contract by acknowledging a debt that can never be paid.

Both forms of liability index a forensic object, a material property outside the legal relation. As Pietz points out, blood relations and productive land are the two classic forms of

¹⁶² William Pietz, "Death of the Deodand: Accursed Objects and the Money Value of Human Life," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 31 (Spring 1997): 105.

¹⁶³ William Pietz, "Material Considerations," 36. Michael Ralph uses the concept to consider the institutionalization of value regimes in colonial and postcolonial Senegal. Michael Ralph, *Forensics of Capital* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

¹⁶⁴ Pietz, "Death of the Deodand," 97.

consideration. A critical concern in seventeenth century forensics, for example, was the physical causality that validated a marriage contract.¹⁶⁵ According to Alfred Radcliffe-Brown's theory of corporate lineage, kinship is an essentially legal institution, linking the person to the community according to a particular configuration of rights and obligations. Radcliffe-Brown follows Henry Sumner Maine in his understanding of modern society as the evolution from property to contract as the organizing principle of social obligation. Kinship establishes a primordial entitlement—a natural right (*in rem*)—to the ownership of property, while contract is an agreement—a positive right (*in personem*)—that creates an obligation to transfer property.¹⁶⁶ Status, estate, state, and the French *etat* are all derivatives of the Latin *estatus*; the transmission of property has depended on the transmission of status in the transition from the dividual personhood of the corporate group to the “need-afflicted and desire-ridden” subject in possession of the self.¹⁶⁷ This duality between natural and positive law maps onto the distinction between nature and culture: the progress narrative of modernity associates contract law with a higher level of social development. Yet, as Wynter observed with respect to FGC, the standpoint of the self-

¹⁶⁵ Pietz, “Material Considerations,” 48.

¹⁶⁶ The distinction between rights *in rem*—literally “as against the world”—and *in personem* is a legal convention inherited from Roman law. “The status of an individual at a given moment of time may be defined as the totality of all his rights and duties as recognized in the social usages (laws and customs) of the society to which he belongs. The rights constituting a status, and similarly the duties, are of many different kinds, some relating to 'the world at large', to the society as a whole, others relating to some definite social group of which the individual is a member (e.g., a man's rights over and duties towards his own clan), or to some group of which he is not a member but to which he stands in a special relation (e.g., a man's relation to his mother's clan in a patrilineal clan system, or to his father's clan in a matrilineal system), and yet others concern his special relations as an individual with other individuals.” A. R. Radcliffe Brown, “Patrilineal and Matrilineal Succession,” in *Structure and Function in Primitive Society* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1952), 37; and Henry Sumner Maine, *Ancient Law: Its Connection with the Early History of Society, and Its Relation to Modern Ideas* (London: John Murray, 1861).

¹⁶⁷ Stephan Palmié, “Thinking with Ngangas: Reflections on Embodiment and the Limits of ‘Objectively Necessary Appearances,’” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 48, no. 4 (2006): 855–57. Also see John L. and Jean Comaroff, “On Personhood: An Anthropological Perspective from Africa,” *Social Identities* 7, no. 2 (2001): 267–83.

possessing, rational subject is the unity that must constitute itself in opposition to the plural personhood of kinship. Thus, property rights *in rem* are posited as nature-as-culture, the indeterminate, incommensurable possibility of conditions for commensurable contracts *in personem*, which is culture-as-nature and thus “rational.”

Within the contemporary culture of capitalism, the immanent contradiction between the entitlement to rights *en rem* and the obligation of contract *in personem* becomes evident when determining liability for personal injury. This is because while relational property acquired in the past can serve as the material consideration for agreement between individuals in the present, it cannot prevent a future claim for damages. Tort is the noncontractual identity between the right of the self-possessing individual to safety and a general duty to protect the public, which only appears in the event of injury or death. Liability is a virtual duty that is actualized by accident. This problem created the impetus for a new corporate form, bringing owners and investors with limited liability into a single entity with legal personhood capable of entering into a contract. Actuarial techniques further systematized risk, transforming debt into assets, and calculated damages according to standardized criteria. Nevertheless, the indeterminacy of the relation between right and contingent duty led legal scholar P. S. Atiyah to refer to tort law as a “damages lottery,” in which private defendants are unable or unwilling to absorb the cost of uncertainty that cannot be calculated as risk.¹⁶⁸ The plaintiffs, on the other hand, are tasked with the grotesque demand of monetizing a life based on an obscure calculus that has its origins in

¹⁶⁸ There are pitched ideological battles over questions of entitlement and liability in tort law. Atiyah’s concerns about excessive liability were an expression of his commitment to the freedom of contract, in opposition to scholars such as Morton Horowitz, who argues that the introduction of the doctrine of negligence in the early nineteenth century protected new capitalist entrepreneurs from strict common law standards governing recovery for harms outside of contract. P. S. Atiyah, *The Damages Lottery* (Oxford, UK: Hart Publishing, 1997); Morton J. Horowitz, *The Transformation of American Law* (Manchester, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977). Also see Pietz, “Death of the Deodand.”

slave insurance. At stake in a tort case is the determination of a contingent jural relation in order to represent the property right of the plaintiff and the monetary obligation of the defendant as complementary, just, and therefore necessary.¹⁶⁹

Like torts, immigration law determines a contingent jural relation in order to represent the right of the migrant and the obligation of the state as complementary, just, and therefore necessary. The citizen is legally bound to the sovereign state by property right *in rem* by embodying the classic forms of consideration: either *jus sanguinis*, the logic of kinship, or *jus soli*, birth on national territory. Immigration law extends the privilege of membership to noncitizens by contract, guaranteed by the forensics of biometric, documentary, and contextual data. Through “naturalization,” the acquisition of citizenship postulates national belonging as the free choice of the deserving migrant while repressing the property relations that make choice impossible.¹⁷⁰ It is this indeterminacy between freedom and coercion, transparency and fraud, that the document or biodatum is supposed to fix: it is the cultural artifact that “naturalizes.”¹⁷¹ Yet these retroactive justifications are shot through with contradictions. The liberal state asserts a natural right to secure its borders yet admits certain foreigners based on their natural right to enter. An irregular migrant who is deportable as an “alien”—without standing to enter into the contract of residency—is nonetheless eligible for cancellation of removal based on *de facto*—i.e., natural—membership within the community.¹⁷² Conceiving of citizenship as a state of

¹⁶⁹ Jurist Albert Kocourek expressed skepticism that rights *in rem* and rights *in personem* could be logically distinguished, even in modern jurisprudence. “The creative fact alone determines what the right is,” he argued. Albert Kocourek, “Rights in Rem,” *University of Pennsylvania Legal Review* 68 (1920): 335. Also see “Contingency in Jural Relations,” *California Law Review* 15 (1926): 19–37.

¹⁷⁰ Coutin et al., “In the Mirror,” 825–26.

¹⁷¹ Barbara Yngvesson and Susan Bibler Coutin, “Backed by Papers: Undoing Persons, Histories, and Return,” *American Ethnologist* 33, no. 2 (2006): 177–90.

¹⁷² See Bosniak, *The Citizen and the Alien*.

becoming corresponds to *uti possidetis*, the presumption in property law according to which possession enhances a claim to ownership. Legal theory that once justified the claims of colonial prospectors and settlers to “discovered” wealth validates the presence of irregular migrants who bear the injuries of past futures and the present risks of multigenerational expropriation.¹⁷³

In Fanta’s original wrongful death case, the jury determined that the trucking company had violated a virtual contract with Fanta by violating her right to life. This right was a property claim on behalf of an estate that already included her next of kin.¹⁷⁴ Fanta was a partible person, the member of an interdependent network that distributes resources and opportunities as wealth in people. As the child chosen to leave, she was more than a part and less than a whole, bearing her family’s future yet incomplete without them. Fanta’s parents sacrificed their daughter to a paper spouse and received the counter-gift of remittances and U.S. residency status, a collective right that could be extended through kinship as a pathway for future mobility.¹⁷⁵ Fanta, in turn, sacrificed her family for the counter-gift of an uncertain freedom. Her decision to move into her father’s brother’s household was a return to the patrilineal fold, after Cissé had lost his affinal status due to his failure to fulfil his spousal obligations. Not only had he treated Fanta poorly; he

¹⁷³ “In postfeudal societies ... the property rights of present asset holders are often used to cut off restitutionary claims against current possessors who are well settled in their use. There is thus a presumption in favor of leaving possession of property undisturbed when the possessor has committed no (new) offense and is using the property productively.... All property regimes strike a balance between a forward-looking interest in *repose* and a backward-looking interest in *redress*.” Robert Meister, *After Evil*, 235. My interest in property law was inspired by the essays in Katherine Verdery and Caroline Humphrey, eds., *Property in Question: Value Transformation in the Global Economy* (Oxford, UK: Berg., 2004)

¹⁷⁴ Radcliffe-Brown, “Patrilineal and Matrilineal Succession,” 34. “By an estate is here meant a collection of rights (whether over persons or things) with the implied duties, the unity of which is constituted either by the fact that they are the rights of a single person and can be transmitted, as a whole, or in division, to some other person or persons, or that they are the rights of a defined group (the corporation) which maintains a continuity of possession.”

¹⁷⁵ For a related analysis, see Lisa Akesson, “Remittances and Relationships: Exchange in Cape Verdean Transnational Families,” *Ethnos* 76, no. 3 (2011): 326–47.

had not followed through with his bridewealth payments, essentially terminating the marriage.¹⁷⁶ Boh brought a lifetime of knowing practice to the negotiations following Fanta's death. He was not motivated by the prospect of personal accumulation but by the distribution of an inheritance that would secure relations within his network, honor Fanta's memory as a good daughter, and enhance his own status as a leader of his community. The settlement, from the position of Fanta's family, was not the trucking company's liability for harm but an unexpected windfall, which like the tacit moral claim to immigration, redistributes wealth and opportunity as a property right to a just share.

Boh's judge was eventually disciplined by the Illinois Court of Appeals for his renegade approach to tort law. Nevertheless, his sovereignty in the courtroom indicated the inherent arbitrariness of legal decision-making.¹⁷⁷ Notwithstanding the framework of constitutional protections, judicial discretion mirrors the plenary power of immigration law.¹⁷⁸ For the judge, perhaps the real threat of Boh's case was the prospect of damages flowing to destitute Malians abroad as part of a transnational moral economy in which migration enacts a right to arbitrage borders. Haunting the liberal tradition like a repressed memory is the non-distinction of property and theft, which continues to accrue interest as a consequence of slavery and colonization. Africans know that this debt has not been paid and must be actively claimed from parasitic

¹⁷⁶ See John L. Comaroff, *The Meaning of Marriage Payments* (New York: Academic Press, 1980).

¹⁷⁷ See Kenneth J. Kress, "Legal Reasoning and Coherence Theories: Dworkin's Rights Thesis, Retroactivity, and the Linear Order of Decisions," *California Law Review* 72 (1984): 369–402.

¹⁷⁸ See Jeanne Hersant and Cécile Vigour, eds., "Judicial Politics: A Symposium," *Law and Social Inquiry* 42, no. 2 (2017): 292–449; and Robin J. Effron, "Ousted: The New Dynamics of Privatized Procedure and Judicial Discretion," *Boston University Law Review* 98 (2018): 127–86; and Hiroshi Motomura, "The Discretion that Matters: Federal Immigration Enforcement, State and Local Arrests, and the Civil-Criminal Line," *UCLA Law Review* 58 (2014): 1819–58.

neocolonial states through adverse possession.¹⁷⁹ Migrants take advantage of an arbitrary jural relation to assert the social network as a form of social security. On the other hand, by validating the legal if defunct marriage over this interdependence, the judge was taking advantage of an arbitrary jural relation to assert the contract as financial security. From a legal standpoint that treats torts as a mechanism for the efficient allocation of risk, Boh's case presented an opportunity to deny property rights *en rem* to a family abroad in order to mitigate the "social cost" of migration.¹⁸⁰ Equipped with the artifact of the marriage certificate as a material consideration, the judge reinterpreted kinship as a forensics of capital, regulating the partibility of personhood by "cutting the network" in order to protect the fiscal interests of a corporation on behalf of the nation.¹⁸¹

Boh's case illustrates changing dynamics of property, personhood, and migration under the hegemony of finance. Mobile circuits of money, information, and people seep through spatial and temporal boundaries.¹⁸² As digital payment systems deterritorialize national currencies, exchange values become the use values that anchor proliferating debts, and markets do not clear.

¹⁷⁹ Adverse possession is a legal term of art according to which the occupation of land to which another person has title serves as the basis for a claim to ownership. Robert Meister explores how this justification for the seizure of colonial property might support a gain-based remedy for cumulative injustice. "Property law is thus the precontractual foundation of market societies (their account of how unowned things come to be owned) and is thus distinguishable from contract and tort law (how owned things can be transferred or damaged) insofar as it retains the possibility of 'restitution,' which is a nonpossessory right created through the operation of law as a remedy for past injustice." Meister, *After Evil*, 234. See also the notion of "reverse colonization" in Coutin, "In the Mirror," 830–31.

¹⁸⁰ Ronald Coase, "The Problem of Social Cost," *Journal of Law and Economics* 3 (1960): 1–44. The judge's activism with regard to tort cases led the Illinois Supreme Court to remove him from both Boh's case and a later lawsuit involving an employment-related cancer death, which devolved into a two-year "rolling inquisition" after a settlement had been reached.

¹⁸¹ Strathern, "Cutting the Network," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 2, no. 3 (1996): 517–35.

¹⁸² Coutin, "In the Mirror," 811; McKay Cunningham, "Privacy Law That Does Not Protect Privacy, Forgetting the Right to Be Forgotten," *Buffalo Law Review* 65, no. 3 (2017): 495–546; and Maria Tzanou, "The War Against Terror and Transatlantic Information Sharing: Spillovers of Privacy or Spillovers of Security?" *Utrecht Journal of International and European Law* 31, no. 80 (2015): 87–103.

Our data follows us wherever we go, recording our actions, aggregating our features, and programming our options. The intrusion of the future into our relation with the past deprives the present of its future, but it also gives rise to new relations. Indeed, privileging Cissé's contractual right as Fanta's beneficiary countered a contrary tendency within family law to privilege status over contract. Today, the liberal convention of possessive individualism is giving way to hybrid formations associated with the impact of new reproductive technologies and LGBTI families on kinship practices.¹⁸³ As sociotechnical systems cut across boundaries that distinguish persons, families, and nations, identity and belonging appear not as fixed properties but as fictions, or optional features of portfolio personhood leveraged by risk-takers and imposed on risk-bearers who cannot afford to choose. International mobility and dual nationality reconfigure citizenship as nonconstitutional: neither primordial birthright nor a contractual commitment to integrate, but as a contingent claim that fluctuates in value based on the sociopolitical volatility of the nation-state. Speculative citizenship hedges the risk of migration by disassociating the circulation of wealth from investment in a life abroad. As states assume derivative strategies to manage uncertainty, creating conditions of austerity for the bearers of risk, the bearers must take risks of their own.

What is the possibility for agency when the burden of legitimacy is shifted from the polity to the person, configured not as a bearer of rights but of risk? As Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat observed shortly after 9/11, we are all suspects now.¹⁸⁴ The sociopolitical

¹⁸³ See Strathern, *Kinship, Law and the Unexpected*; and Elizabeth S. Scott and Robert E. Scott, "From Contract to Status: Collaboration and the Evolution of Novel Family Relationships," *Columbia Law Review* 115 (2015): 293–374.

¹⁸⁴ Edwidge Danticat, forward to *We Are All Suspects Now: Untold Stories from Immigrant Communities after 9/11* by Tram Nguyen (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005). On the law of surveillance and suspicion, see Andrew Guthrie Ferguson, "Big Data and Predictive Reasonable Suspicion," *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 163, no. 2 (2015): 327–410; and Daniel J. Steinbock, "Data Matching, Data Mining, and Due

process described by De Genova that “excludes in” undocumented workers becomes indistinguishable from the “including out” of rights-bearing refugees, resident aliens, and citizens who are criminalized, pathologized, and otherwise determined to be “at risk” to themselves and others. Serres describes the paranoia that accompanies the disruption of binaries: “It might be dangerous not to decide who is the host and who is the *table d’hôte*, who has the gift and who has the loss, and where hostility begins within hospitality.”¹⁸⁵ This imperative to decide the undecidable from an indeterminate position repeats the sovereign exception without reconstituting a norm. As Agamben predicted, the structure of the camp proliferates with the securitization of everyday life: not only the detention of immigrants, criminals and refugees but also hospitals, jobs, political demonstrations, and airport security manifest the routine violence of law.¹⁸⁶ Today the metaphor of contagion is ubiquitous: everyone under surveillance sees the other as a threat because, under surveillance, no one is not a threat, including every actor in the network of global finance, any opportunist with luck, initiative, and the right kind of knowledge.¹⁸⁷ Pervasive anxiety is medicated, distracted, and disavowed by bland quality assurances, as though an epidemic were a matter of customer service.

The day before Duncan died in quarantine, Texas Health Presbyterian Hospital issued the following statement: “Our care team provided Mr. Duncan with the same high level of attention

Process,” *Georgia Legal Review* 40, no. 1 (2005): 4; and Margaret Hu, “Big Data Blacklisting,” *Florida Law Review* 67, no. 5 (2016): 1735–1809. Edwidge Danticat, forward to *We Are All Suspects Now*.

¹⁸⁵ Serres, *The Parasite*, 16.

¹⁸⁶ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 95–105.

¹⁸⁷ “Only repeated crises have taught us that these platforms are not bulletin boards but hypervelocity global bloodstreams into which anyone may introduce a dangerous virus without a vaccine.” Shoshana Zuboff, “You Are Now Remotely Controlled,” *New York Times*, January 24, 2020. Robert Esposito considers the contemporary preoccupation with infection—as exemplified in Zuboff’s statement—to be an autoimmune response to the sanitation of biopolitical control: “a limit-point beyond which the entire horizon of biopower is likely to come into deadly conflict with itself.” *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life*, trans. Zakiya Hanafi (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2011), 141.

and care that would be given any patient, regardless of nationality or ability to pay for care. We have a long history of treating a multicultural community in this area.”¹⁸⁸ Just as Duncan had gotten on the plane, unaware that he had contracted Ebola, an emergency room doctor had sent him home with his symptoms, hoping for the best. Duncan’s family threatened to sue the hospital for negligence, then settled out of court. “If left to the community, there would be a lawsuit right now,” reported a family friend to the press.¹⁸⁹ On the internet, an image of Duncan hovers between life and law, not quite forgotten.

¹⁸⁸ “Dallas’ Ebola Patient Waited Days for Experimental Drug,” *CNN*, October 7, 2014.

¹⁸⁹ Justin Moyer, “Ebola Victim Thomas Eric Duncan’s Family Has Settled with Dallas Hospital,” *Washington Post*, November 12, 2014.

CHAPTER 5

Working with What You've Got:

Making Time Count

Not only could you travel upward toward success but you could travel downward as well; up and down, in retreat as well as in advance, crabways and crossways and around in a circle, meeting your old selves coming and going and perhaps all at the same time.

—Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 1952

The appetite to live kills the dignity of living.

—Mariama Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, 1981

The day Olivia won the lottery was the happiest day of her life. She was living in France at the time, having just completed a masters' degree in marketing at the *Université de Nantes*. She had also just given birth to a son, named "Adolphe" after her favorite Makossa musician, the scandalous, pro-feminist Petit-Pays who shares her father's Douala ancestry.

"It was such a relief!" she told me. "I did not want to go back to Cameroon as a single mother. I wanted another kind of future. But I wasn't having any luck finding a good job, and I didn't want to wind up *sans visa*." She laughed at her double entendre; Petit-Pays named his band *Les Sans Visa* after he was deported from France for being out of status.

So Olivia applied for the United States diversity lottery, a literal gamble for residency that is open only to applicants from countries with relatively low rates of immigration.

"I didn't have anything to lose," she told me. "But I never expected to actually *win*!"

This was when Olivia began crying. We were sitting in the office of a social service agency where she was hoping to get some help finding a job. It was 2010, and the caseworker was sympathetic, but had nothing to offer.

“I cry easily,” she said, embarrassed by her outburst. But she had good reason to despair. After six months in the United States, she had yet to find employment. “It’s no better than in France. But at least there I had friends!”

Olivia had decided to settle in Chicago with her sister and brother-in-law, who had entered the country five years earlier on a temporary H1-B visa. His employer was pleased enough with his performance as a computer programmer to sponsor him for permanent residency, but those had been better times. He was laid off shortly after Olivia arrived and was supporting both families through freelance jobs, mostly as a trouble-shooter.

“I thought this was the land of opportunity,” Olivia told me. She felt isolated in the African American community where her sister owned a home. “It’s so cold.” She was not only talking about the weather. “It’s not at all like in the movies. People are always sizing you up, you know what I mean? They look at you, but they don’t say anything unless they want something from you.”

Olivia had applied for the Diversity Visa Program lottery on a whim from a small city in France far from home, where her student status defined her relationship to the surrounding community and her qualifications for the visa were never in question. The process appeared relatively straightforward and the random outcome miraculous. Little did she know that legal permanent residency was no guarantee of economic survival in the United States, particularly for black immigrants during a recession.

My friend Amina suggested that Olivia volunteer for a nonprofit organization to get her foot in the door. “Lottery winners have the hardest time getting settled here,” she told me. “Their expectations are too high. At least refugees get services! I know a family of four that came over a year ago. They speak French, but there’s nothing they can do with it. The father’s even got the *bac*, which means nothing here. They’ve been living with his cousin, but *that’s* not going to last forever, I’ll tell you that. And then, once you’re here and everybody you know back home thinks you’re in paradise, what do you do next? Where are you going to go? Who’s going to help you? You’ve got to wonder if it’s even worth immigrating.”¹

These questions came up often among my informants in the years following the Great Recession of 2007–2009. Even those with high skills and stable employment felt a seismic shift in the socioeconomic landscape. Jobs were lost in every sector of the economy. Friends and relatives with secure salaries were called upon to share the wealth, and everyone had less money to spend, slashing entrepreneurial livelihoods. Employers pushed fewer workers harder, at lower pay and fewer benefits. “Money doesn’t stretch as far as it used to,” people complained. “The United States feels more like Africa all the time.”

Were we witnessing a systemic transformation in the structure of work or a temporary dip in an otherwise healthy economy? The Great Recession rivaled the Great Depression of the 1930s in terms of the severity and length of its impact on the U.S. economy. This is a matter of historical record: unemployment soared, housing prices and investment portfolios crashed, and households lost 18 percent of their net worth, the largest decline since the federal government

¹ See Tekleab Elos Hailu et al., “Lived Experience of Diversity Visa Lottery Immigrants in the United States,” *Qualitative Report* 17, no. 102 (2011): 1–17.

began collecting data on wealth accumulation.² The causes and consequences of the crisis, however, are controversial, polarizing political discourse along lines that reflect conflicting assumptions about the nature of capitalism and its relationship to politics.

Critics of neoliberalism tend to place the crisis within the *longue durée* of historical change. The subprime mortgage crisis was not only the result of a speculative bubble of real estate prices and predatory lending practices, but a manifestation of long-term change in the national economy. Since the late 1960s, industrialized countries have been shedding the highly-paid manufacturing jobs on which the “Fordist family wage” of the labor-capital compromise had been based. The lower-productivity service jobs to replace them have failed to provide comparable stability or political leverage.³ In countries like the United States, where the state has privatized the business of social reproduction, any worker without assets is vulnerable to the generalized precarity of work, whatever their class origins or education.⁴ Most employees, even

² As dated by the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER), the recession between December 2007 to June 2009 far exceeded the average period from peak to trough of post-World War II recessions of 11.1 months. Unemployment rates doubled during the recession for nearly all subgroups of the population, rising from 4.5 to about 10 percent between 2010. As many as 30 million individuals lost their jobs, by some estimates, and long-term unemployment doubled its historical high. During that period, both gross domestic product and available jobs declined by about 6 percent, and median family incomes declined by about 8 percent. See Arne L. Kalleberg and Till M. von Wachter, “The U.S. Labor Market During and After the Great Recession: Continuities and Transformations,” *Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 3, no. 3 (2017): 1–19; and Blake Sisk and Katharine M. Donato, “Weathering the Storm? The Great Recession and the Employment Status Transitions of Low-Skill Male Immigrant Workers in the United States,” *International Migration Review* (Fall 2016): 1–35.

³ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007); Lisa Adkins, *The Time of Money* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018).

⁴ In fact, unemployment among recent college graduates demonstrated the most dramatic increase, from 9 percent in 2007 to a peak of 17.6 percent in 2009. “While it is still too early to assess the longer-run effects of the Great Recession, this downturn was different in at least two respects. First, the impact of the unemployment rate on recent graduates was two to three times larger than in past recessions. Second, high-skill majors were much less of a buffer against these shocks than in past recessions.” David Card and Alexandre Mas, “The Labor Market in the Aftermath of the Great Recession,” *Journal of Labor Economics* 34, no. 1 (2016): S6. Also see Joseph G. Altonji et al., “Cashier or Consultant? Entry Labor Market Conditions, Field of Study, and Career Success,” *Journal of Labor Economics* 34, no. 1 (2016): S361–S401; and Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

in professional and managerial jobs, have witnessed a deterioration in work conditions: inadequate wages and benefits, irregular hours, a lack of autonomy, and pervasive instability.⁵ Furthermore, the prohibitive costs of housing, higher education, and health insurance, even under Obama's Affordable Care Act, have contributed to a widespread reliance on consumer credit to meet basic needs.

The persistence of high unemployment following the resumption of growth in 2009 indicated a reorganization of the labor market that had been in process for decades. Government statistics obscured the extent of the damage by failing to count workers who had stopped looking for jobs or were involuntarily forced into part-time or informal work.⁶ Indications of "recovery" were also questionable: the Congressional Budget Office reduced growth targets, and while employment finally rebounded in 2014, the numbers reflected a far smaller percentage of the working-age population.⁷ Moreover, although official unemployment in early 2020 was at its lowest point in two decades, wage growth has failed to keep up with the cost of living since 1973.⁸ The OPEC oil embargo of that year is often identified as the watershed event marking the

⁵ Arne L. Kalleberg, *Good Jobs, Bad Jobs: The Rise of Polarized and Precarious Employment Systems in the United States, 1970s to 2000s* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2011).

⁶ Lawrence F. Katz, *Long-term Unemployment in the Great Recession*, testimony for the Joint Economic Committee U.S. Congress Hearing on 'Long-Term Unemployment: Causes, Consequences and Solutions' April 29, 2010. Unemployment among recent college graduates demonstrated the most dramatic increase, from 9 percent in 2007 to a peak of 17.6 percent in 2009.

⁷ Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, *Chart Book: Tracking the Post-Great Recession Economy*. February 11, 2020, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/economy/chart-book-tracking-the-post-great-recession-economy>; Steven F. Hipple, "Labor Force Participation: What Has Happened Since the Peak?" U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Monthly Labor Review*, (September 2016).

⁸ In July 2019, the U.S. official unemployment rate was 3.9 percent, with 1.5 million new private-sector jobs counted from the beginning of the year, and 19.5 million since 2010. Yet, after adjusting for inflation, "today's average hourly wage has just about the same purchasing power it did in 1978, following a long slide in the 1980s and early 1990s and bumpy, inconsistent growth since then. In fact, in real terms average hourly earnings peaked more than 45 years ago: The \$4.03-an hour rate recorded in January 1973 had the same purchasing power that \$23.68 would today." Drew De Silver, *For Most U.S. Workers, Real Wages Have Barely Budged in Decades*, Pew Research Center, August 7, 2018.

transition to post-Fordist production.⁹ Ever since, earned income has increased only for well-paid professionals, which combined with their capital gains, exacerbated wealth inequality.¹⁰

Many macroeconomists interpret these trends as signs of international development. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), for example, the globalization of underemployment, wage stagnation, and income inequality is an effect of technological change and the international expansion of supply chains, which have “decoupled” wages from productivity. Drawing on the lessons of history, OECD publications have recommended skills training, competitive market integration, policy reforms, and collective bargaining as the means to “raise the labour share and support the transmission of productivity gains to wages.”¹¹ The IMF’s *World Economic Outlook* shares this pragmatic optimism.

⁹ See Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 156; Michael Hudson, *Global Fracture* (London: Pluto Press, 2005), 78–93; and Moishe Postone, “The Current Crisis and the Anachronism of Value,” *Continental Thought and Theory* (2017): 40–41. While these authors agree on the economic and geopolitical significance of phenomena—the end of the Bretton Woods Arrangement, the oil boycott and recycling of petrodollars, the Yom Kippur War, and the overthrow of Chilean socialist president Salvador Allende—that converged in 1973, their interpretations differ in many respects. What they all miss in this constellation of events is the publication of the Black-Scholes-Merton model of options pricing, which created a mechanism for hedging against market volatility. “After 1973, modern financial theory became an engine for translating political and economic insecurity into drivers of market volatility that could be measured and, eventually, monetized through the marketing of new financial products.” Robert Meister, *Justice Is an Option* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).

¹⁰ See Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman, *Wealth Inequality in the United States Since 1913* (Working Paper 20625, National Bureau of Economic Research, October 2014); and Jon D. Wisman, “Wage Stagnation, Rising Inequality and the Financial Crisis of 2008,” *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 37, no. 4 (2013): 921–45.

¹¹ “At the end of 2017, nominal wage growth in the OECD area was only half of what it was ten years earlier: in Q2 2007, when the average of unemployment rates of OECD countries was about the same as now, the average nominal wage growth was 5.8 percent vs 3.2 percent in Q4 2017. More worryingly, wage stagnation affects low-paid workers much more than those at the top: real labour incomes of the top 1 percent of earners have increased much faster than those of median full-time workers in recent years, reinforcing a long-standing trend.” Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, “Rising Employment Overshadowed by Unprecedented Wage Stagnation,” press release announcing *OECD Employment Outlook 2018*, April 7, 2018, <https://www.oecd.org>. According to the 2018 World Inequality Report, compiled by a team of leading economists, incomes for the poorest half of the global population doubled between 1980 and 2016, accounting for only 12 percent of overall income growth, while the richest one percent captured more than twice that share—27 percent—over the same period. Facundo Alvaredo et al., eds., *World Inequality Report* (Cambridge, UK: World Inequality Database, 2018), 52.

Notwithstanding concerns about “accommodative monetary policy” and climate change, the January 2020 update encouraged multilateral cooperation and “a more balanced policy mix at the national level,” expressing optimism that international trade and domestic consumption would “inch up” lagging growth in both emerging and advanced economies.¹²

Financial economists, on the other hand, tend to approach social policy as a means for more balanced markets rather than more balanced societies. Accordingly, the IMF’s 2019 *Financial Stability Report* is less sanguine about the health of the global economy. It describes a process of global financial integration in which corporations compensate for lagging returns with bond market financing. Governments exacerbate this tendency with low interest rates that repress the cost of financial transactions, generating perceptions of market stability and robust national economies. These perceptions in turn lead to riskier and more illiquid investments, industrial expansion in the face of lagging demand, and climate-related risks. These risky investments are increasingly located in “emerging and frontier market economies,” which increases their debt burden and expands U.S.-dollar funding by non-U.S. banks. These are all “financial vulnerabilities” that increase the likelihood of another financial crisis.¹³ The report cautions that

The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that of 2.2 billion workers worldwide, 61 percent are employed or self-employed informally. *World Employment and Social Outlook* (Geneva, Switzerland: ILO, 2020), 12–13. OECD’s 2019 Employment Outlook, subtitled “The Future of Work,” emphasized automation, social protection, and retraining: “The world has become more integrated—exports have increased, on average, from 23 percent of GDP in 1975 to 43 percent in 2017; 40 percent of jobs created between 2005 and 2016 were in digitally intensive sectors. While just over 60 percent of high-skill workers take part in training, only about 20 percent of low-skill workers do.” OECD, *Employment Outlook* (Paris, France: OECD, 2018), 63. <http://www.oecd.org/employment/outlook/>.

¹² International Monetary Fund, “Tentative Stabilization, Sluggish Recovery?” *World Economic Outlook Update*, January 20, 2020, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2020/01/20/weo-update-january2020>.

¹³ IMF, *Global Financial Stability Report: Lower for Longer* (Washington DC: IMF, 2019).

“although finance can help mobilize funding to achieve sustainability goals and ensure that risks are appropriately priced, policies and regulations are needed to set price signals for markets.”¹⁴

The good governance model espoused by international organizations—championing sustainable growth, on one hand, and sustainable debt, on the other—is predicated on the assumption that the evolution of the global system can be steered in a direction that is consistent with the values of liberal democracy. This project relies on the authority of government statistics, rendered objective through methodologies of collection and analysis that become more accurate with improvements in data science. Historians have demonstrated the significance of such social facts in the emergence of modern states. Like cartography, demography created an external vantage point from which society could be represented as a bounded and discrete whole with generalizable characteristics.¹⁵ The possibility of neutral description is predicated on the division of labor between fact-generating experts and value-legitimizing political actors.¹⁶ However, “evidence-based policy” always creates “policy-based evidence” that reinforces the analytical frameworks governing the collection and interpretation of data.¹⁷ This problem of self-reference has been central to the philosophy of science for over a century.¹⁸ However, the applied sciences

¹⁴ IMF, 91.

¹⁵ See Ian Hacking, *The Emergence of Probability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975) and *The Taming of Chance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

¹⁶ See Antoinette Baujard, “Value Judgments and Economic Expertise,” (Working Paper 1314, Groupe D’Analyse et de Théorie Economique Lyon-St Etienne, March 21, 2013).

¹⁷ Andrea Saltelli and Mario Giampietro, “The Fallacy of Evidence-Based Policy,” in *The Rightful Place of Science: Science on the Verge* (Tempe, AZ: Consortium for Science, Policy and Outcomes, 2016).

¹⁸ See Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method* (London: Verso, 2010). Philosopher Thomas Kuhn coined the term “paradigm” to describe the construction of norms that organize scientific worldviews and practices, while Michel Foucault’s “episteme” encompasses a broader range of discourses, representing the conditions of possibility for understanding in history. Network theorists such as Niklas Luhmann and Bruno Latour have taken an inverse approach by attending to the possibility of these conditions as they emerge within knowledge systems. Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962); Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage, 1994); Bruno Latour, *The Pasteurization of France* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); and Niklas Luhmann, *Essays on Self-Reference* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

have bracketed any doubts as to the truth value of their models, inferring validity from the consistency of findings that are often an effect of measurement itself. In other words, statistics have power not because of what they represent but because of what they do.

Doubt with respect to the relation between data and the phenomena they represent creates political as well as epistemological problems. Are the “macroprudential policies” recommended by the IMF an appropriate response to historical developments, or will they merely be interpreted as having “set price signals for markets”? While a focus on sustainability anticipates that the expansion of productive capacity can meet the demands of future populations, market fundamentalists argue that markets are already sustainable as a natural field of competition. “By virtually any definition of economic well-being,” proclaimed a 2019 editorial in the *Wall Street Journal*, “Americans are substantially better off today than they were a half-century ago.”¹⁹ Challenging the validity of official statistics on inequality, the authors point out that estimates of income based on census data ignore the redistributive impact of taxation, employee benefits, and transfer payments. In addition, measures of price inflation fail to account for the substitution effects of new technologies, along with expanded consumer choices and the impact of free information on the quality of life. Lifestyles have changed too much to bear comparison over decades; measuring change within rather than between generations would more accurately represent economic life today.²⁰

¹⁹ Phil Gramm and John Early, “The Myth of ‘Wage Stagnation,’” *Wall Street Journal*, May 17, 2019. The authors are both prominent Republicans. As chairman of the Senate Banking Committee, Phil Gramm spearheaded the 1999 legislation that repealed portions of the Glass-Steagall Act, creating the conditions for the subprime mortgage crisis. Formerly assistant commissioner at the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), John Early owns a consultancy firm called “Vital Few, LLC.” Early details his criticism of BLS methodology in “Reassessing the Facts about Inequality, Poverty, and Redistribution,” *Cato Institute Policy Analysis*, April 24, 2018.

²⁰ Michael R. Strain, “The Story of Stagnating Wages Was Mostly Wrong,” *Bloomberg Opinions*, May 15, 2015.

These arguments invite a variety of rebuttals, yet the debate is less over measurement than against it. Insofar as evidence is a function of the episteme in which it is produced and interpreted, it serves to reinforce polarized perceptions of contemporary experience.²¹ At one extreme, the notion that sustainability is even possible under current conditions indicates that capital, having lost all relation to the moral economy of social reproduction, is driving the world towards environmental catastrophe and sociopolitical collapse.²² At the other extreme is an invitation to abandon the sense of emergency: inequality promotes rather than forecloses economic opportunity, wealth accumulates to those who deserve it, and climate change is an inevitable inconvenience that will be addressed through technological innovation.²³ The 2008 Recession has been consigned to the past and the future is claimed for the present as the best of all possible worlds.²⁴

²¹ The progressive Pew Research Center acknowledged these “alternative estimates of inequality” in a recent report on income inequality in the U.S. Juliana Menasce Horowitz et al., “Most Americans Say There is Too Much Economic Inequality in the U.S., but Fewer than Half Call it a Top Priority,” *Pew Research Center*, January 9, 2020, 14.

²² Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1944); Martijn Konings, *Capital and Time* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018), 3.

²³ “Those who favor more redistribution need to explain to the bottom 60 percent of income-earning households why they should keep working when they could get almost as much from riding in the wagon as they get now from pulling it.” Phil Gramm and John F. Early, “The Truth About Income Inequality,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 3, 2019.

²⁴ In his 1710 essays on theodicy, Wilhelm Leibniz famously deduced that actuality is “the best of all possible worlds” by applying the principle of sufficient reason to divine intervention. Comparing the financial crisis to the 1755 Lisbon earthquake, which led the philosophers to reject Leibniz’s argument, Joseph Vogl calls such theological fatalism “oikodicy,”—“a doctrine for all the evil and all the catastrophes that appear reconcilable with the wise establishment of the system.” Joseph Vogl, “The Sovereignty Effect: Markets and Power in the Economic Regime,” *Qui Parle* 23, no. 1 (2014): 134–35. This orientation is evident in a public opinion survey, according to which inequality is widely recognized as a problem that cannot be assumed as a shared responsibility. “The vast majority of Americans who say there’s too much economic inequality in the country these days (86 percent) say the government should not raise taxes on people like them in order to address economic inequality.” Horowitz, “Most Americans Say,” 40.

It is tempting to politicize these incompatible sensibilities in class terms. Yet as I will explore in the pages that follow, today's antinomy is not between labor and capital but between risk-bearers who seek to realize the value of the past in the present, and risk-takers who seek to actualize the value of the future in the present. The channeling of public resources into the maintenance of market stability creates a scenario where underemployed taxpayers must take on debt to make ends meet. They are, in a sense, borrowing from their future selves and may politically identify with creditors demanding personal accountability rather than debtors who are alienated from the freedom of capital. It is perhaps fitting that Donald Trump is a debtor who has repeatedly gone bankrupt without losing his capacity to accumulate wealth. His popularity among voters who would benefit from higher wages and a social safety net may be the ideological effect of an economy in which social wealth is reserved as collateral for uncertain bids on the future. Risk-bearers are on the front lines of credit expansion and contraction; they are taken in and expelled by the volatility of financial markets. In such a system, many learn to hedge their current position by expanding their options. They become risk-takers, leveraging their possessions, their talents, even their affect—envy and blame, pleasure and guilt—as an asset in the information economy. They learn to capitalize on precarity whenever possible by transforming deficits into surplus through arbitrage.

This chapter documents the impact of the Great Recession on three immigrant workers. Jean-Paul labored in a factory under punishing conditions as his employer, a Chicago-based manufacturer, attempted to increase productivity during early the post-recession recovery. As a risk-bearer, Jean-Paul failed to realize his human capital in a saturated labor market. Stéphane, in contrast, was an information technology specialist in the insurance industry who enjoyed a risk-taker's options when he was laid off, thanks to a diversified portfolio of investments in the U.S.

and Africa. Amina found herself in a third position as a transnational *femme d'affairs* who leveraged debts to make ends meet when the demand for her products and services evaporated on the same two continents. These trajectories illustrate what Arjun Appadurai has described as “the broadening of risk-taking and risk-bearing as properties of human life that link distant societies, cross national and market boundaries, and connect both the institutions of power and the agencies of ordinary human beings worldwide.”²⁵

Central to this dissertation is the assertion that speculation is the primary form of economic action and self-understanding within financialized capitalism, not only for banks, investment companies, hedge funds, and private equity firms, but for all corporations-as-persons and persons-as-corporations, as well as the governments that authorize them. The temporality of risk management governs digitally-mediated platforms, where the synchronicity of market-making and unmaking binds a fleeting future to an infinite past. The production and consumption of commodities, a value relation that supports life, is subsumed by the instant security of liquidity, the negation of value by price. Nancy Munn describes value creation as “an ongoing dialectic of possibilities and counter-possibilities—explicit assertions of positive and negative value potentials—through which the members of the society are engaged in an effort to construct and control themselves and their own world.” Under financialization, debt is the negative value claim on future wealth that holds the positive value of social reproduction hostage to the threat of crisis. As both risk-bearers and risk-takers, many migrants avoid immiseration by practicing

²⁵ Arjun Appadurai, *The Future as Cultural Fact* (London: Verso, 2013), 3.

arbitrage as a “strategic temporalization.”²⁶ The promise that debts will someday be made good is a position from which it remains possible to act.

The Wages of Work

Jean-Paul loved airplanes. From the time he was a village child in the Republic of Congo, he dreamed of being a pilot and traveling the world. A talented student, he enrolled in the *Université Marien Ngouabi* in 2003, and eventually earned a degree in Aeronautical Engineering at the *Ecole Africaine d’Exploitation de l’Aviation Civile* in Niamey, Niger. Following graduation, Jean-Paul was recruited to manage maintenance operations at Malabo International Airport in Equatorial Guinea. When the job evaporated after only a year, however, it quickly became clear that he lacked the contacts to practice his profession in Africa. Instead, he channeled his energies into his work with an evangelical church in Brazzaville. In 2009, he was put in charge of logistical planning for a delegation of American missionaries, and though he knew very little English, he formed a close friendship with a businessman from Chicago who shared his passion for flying. “Jean-Paul was a brilliant man and a dedicated servant of God, living in a trap,” Mike McGovern would tell me later. “We just had to get him out of there.”

In September 2012, Jean-Paul entered the United States as a temporary religious worker, sponsored by Mike’s church in Naperville. The visa, which could be extended for up to five years, stipulated that Jean-Paul be employed by the congregation for at least twenty hours a week. Lacking the funds to meet that commitment, however, and cognizant that Jean-Paul needed to support both himself and his family in Brazzaville, church leaders arranged for a job at

²⁶ “Part of the wider problem of managing time in work contexts, such strategic temporalizations illuminate ways in which time is not merely ‘lived,’ but ‘constructed’ in the living.” Nancy D. Munn, “The Cultural Anthropology of Time: A Critical Essay,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 21 (1992): 109.

Pagel Brothers, a sheet metal factory, side-by-side with undocumented immigrants who were mostly from Mexico.

Jean-Paul and I met through his girlfriend Sandrine, a hair braider from Côte d'Ivoire who was an active member of Amina's natural hair care association. During the summer of 2012, Jean-Paul and I would rendezvous at a park by the DuPage River on Sunday afternoons and walk for miles. He was a tall, slender man who moved with a solid stride, as though he were prepared for a long, hard trip.

"Shouldn't you be asleep?" I asked him the first time we met. His eyes were red and his shoulders stooped. I felt bad claiming his precious day of rest.

"I don't need a lot of sleep," he replied. I would later find out that he was being ironic. From the moment he was hired, Jean-Paul had spent virtually every waking hour on the shop floor, cutting sheets of aluminum to build weatherproof security boxes for telecommunications equipment. When he couldn't take the pace and tried to sneak a brief nap in the car, someone filmed him sleeping. He got a warning and started drinking a lot of coffee.

"It's so beautiful here," he would say, every time we reached the covered bridge. Jean-Paul admired the big skies and broad plains of the Midwest. "Just being here is good." These words were a signal to attend to our surroundings. We would stand side-by-side, as though in prayer, watching the river streaming beneath us. "They treat us like animals," he continued. "But there's nothing any of us can do about it." In our early conversations, he would try to speak English and quickly lapse into French. Yet within just a few months he started gaining fluency in Spanish, which he had learned in Equatorial Guinea, and that became our language of choice. His coworkers were almost all "temporary" workers, hired and administered by a contract agency that recruited in Mexican neighborhoods. "Nobody else would do such hard labor for so

little pay. Only men who don't have a choice." The workers were all men, trapped like a pen full of roosters, always on the verge of pecking each other's eyes out. They didn't seem to like each other, but they *really* didn't like him, and he knew it was because he was black. They told him as much, nicknaming him *Negro* and telling race jokes in Spanish. And it wasn't just the Mexicans; the Polish foremen were hostile and menacing. The only other black person around was a woman in quality control who spoke only English and got angry when Jean-Paul didn't understand what she was saying. "You look black, but you're not like us," she said to him once. "You don't know what it means to be black in America. Right now you're more African than black, but after a while you'll learn."

Still, Jean-Paul didn't blame them. "You see a new worker come in, so young and glad to have a job. He starts out working hard to make an impression and get promoted. He doesn't realize that he's just raising the productivity bar for the rest of us. The others give him the silent treatment, make fun of him. Sometimes he gets the message. He can't keep it up anyway. If he doesn't get the message, he gets injured. The ambulance takes him away, and you never see him again."

Though Jean-Paul wasn't "officially" employed by the company, he was paying into a health insurance program through the church. The contract employees, however, had no coverage at all. Jean-Paul discovered this when the human resources manager from the contract agency arrived at the factory for an impromptu information session. She told them in Spanish that they couldn't get coverage because the insurance companies suspected too many of them had fake documents. "They can't take the risk on you," she explained. "You're lucky to have a job at all."

Jean-Paul found the situation shocking. "You don't expect this kind of place to exist in

the United States. It's supposed to be better than that in this country. I mean this is the twenty-first century! But it's hell down there. They're always pushing for us to work faster. They keep track of how long we spend in the bathroom. We get fifteen minutes to eat. The other day the *jefe* told us he was going to lock the door to keep us from leaving before our break, and then he did it. He locked the doors so nobody could get out." The work was very dangerous, even for careful and experienced workers. He looked down at his hands, which were covered with medical tape. "We're always getting cut. If you're not careful, you can get stuck in the machines. The other day, a part came off and went flying past my head. I'm an engineer. I know my machine. It was going 600 rpm. It could have killed me." Every time we met, Jean-Paul would tell me about another injury. One co-worker crushed a finger and treated it with *aloe vera* instead of going to the doctor. A middle-aged man kept fainting from the extreme heat. "One day I saw his hand hanging out from behind the metal case, and I honestly thought he was dead! I ran in there and shook him good, but he was just passed out. He might have a heart condition, I told him. We don't get days off for getting hurt, much less going to the doctor. They'll just get somebody to replace you, and that's it."

It took some time for Jean-Paul to figure out the company's chain of command. Layer upon layer of intermediary supervisors separated the crisp-shirted church patriarch from the newly hired, Spanish-monolingual grunts. He didn't really know the score until he met José. "Sometimes I wish they'd just come in here and clean out all the *indocumentados*," José liked to say. "Then, maybe we'd have a chance to make things better." Jean-Paul flinched a little as he told me this, and so did I. "To tell you the truth, I think that job is making him kind of crazy. I ask him to listen to himself. I mean, it's not like he's a citizen or anything. He married a white woman. That's how he got his papers." Jean-Paul shrugged, perplexed. "This country does

strange things to people.” He lowered his voice as he said this, as though it were a seditious statement that he might come to regret.

Most of the time, José didn’t talk much; on the contrary, he walked around with his eyes downcast and his head bowed, as though he were hiding something. Nevertheless, he made an exception when it came to Jean-Paul. During their lunch break, José would corner Jean-Paul before he could slip out to his car, and his stories would flow in a torrent, years’ worth of complaints in need of release. “I know guys like that at home,” Jean-Paul told me. “Everything is a conspiracy. But then I started seeing it myself. Whenever somebody asks for a raise or tries to quit, they call the contract agency, and he never comes back. If you work for the company, they send you up the ladder with your complaint, and it’s like in Africa. You’ve got to go through so many people that you’ll probably get frustrated and give up eventually, and if you don’t, the Polish guy in charge of all the supervisors will threaten to deport you. Even if you’ve got papers, he says he’ll find a way.” Jean-Paul paused, wringing his hands. It was a mannerism he developed over the course of the winter. Between the cold and the work, his hands got so stiff he could barely move his fingers.

One afternoon, after Jean-Paul had been working at the company for about four months, all the line workers were pulled into a meeting where Joe Pagel, the president of the company, held forth on the circumstances driving the increasing demands on their work. It was a real crowd: two hundred twenty-eight workers in two buildings, two shifts. Pagel told them the company was in danger of going bankrupt because of growing international competition. If they went out of business, everyone was out of a job. “This is a ship,” he told them, “and we’ve got to row together. Anybody who isn’t rowing at the same pace has got to go.” José elbowed Jean-Paul in the ribs. “A slave ship, he means.”

They were extending shifts from twelve to fifteen hours in order to create greater “opportunities” for overtime pay. When Jean-Paul tried to decline this offer, he was scheduled for the longer shift anyway. “They’re cutting corners,” he told me. The supervisors weren’t trained to monitor or maintain the machines, and workers had to improvise their own “fixes,” welding wires and greasing moving parts. A new employee, nineteen-year-old Miguelito, was put to work sanding aluminum sheets, producing a fine dust that was flammable at high temperatures. The machine was equipped with ventilation hoses, which Miguelito found handy for waste disposal. After a few months, the cooling unit began flooding. Worried about electrocution, José tried to bring this problem to the supervisors’ attention but was told to mind his own business. José tied the live cables off the floor and gave Miguelito a pair of rubber boots. “José doesn’t have any seniority there,” Jean-Paul told me. “The supervisors don’t trust him, like he’s a spy or something. But it’s really just that he tells them things they don’t want to hear. He tells everybody that twenty years ago a white guy was getting paid \$18 an hour to work that same machine, and he belonged to a union.”

In April 2013, the machine blew up, nearly killing Miguelito and injuring three other workers. The explosion was so powerful that there were cracks in the concrete walls. “That’s when José did it,” Jean-Paul whispered. We were in a Senegalese restaurant that had become our meeting place during the coldest months. It was a beautiful day, yet Jean-Paul barely noticed the thaw. He had developed an involuntary twitch under his left eye, which he rubbed repeatedly as he described a visit with José to see Miguelito in the hospital. Miguelito’s mother, niece, and stepfather were in a private room with the patient, who was on oxygen, with third degree burns all over his body. “They’re afraid of you,” José told Miguelito’s family. “Who do you think is paying for this private hospital room? You’ve got to sue them, or nothing is ever going to

change.” When Jean-Paul was driving home from the hospital, José called to tell him that he had just filed an anonymous tip with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). “He told me he had to do something.”

Jean-Paul was anxious about the potential consequences of José’s action. He agreed that something had to happen and doubted that management would make any voluntary improvements. Right after the explosion, uniforms were handed out, pictures were taken, and IDs with bar codes were distributed, but only to permanent employees. This included both Jean-Paul and José, but not the contract workers. “José thinks they’re expecting a raid from ICE,” he told me. “The suspense is killing me!” So was the accelerated overtime schedule. On top of his aches and pains, Jean-Paul was having trouble sleeping even when he could. At work, he would find himself staring into space, and he was getting threatening looks from his supervisor. One morning Jean-Paul was stopped by the local police. They thought he was drunk, but he passed the breathalyzer test and they let him go. “The workers are always getting stopped,” he told me. “They always let us go, even the ones that don’t have a drivers’ license. The boss has friends in high places. But they want us to know they’re watching.” Lately, a patrol would show up in front of the factory for hours at a time.

A week later, Jean-Paul was transferred to the quality-control division in another building. He was sorry to leave José behind, but he wasn’t going to miss the machine work. Best of all, he no longer had to work compulsory overtime. It seemed as though his education was finally paying off: it was a desk job right off the factory floor. He was supposed to keep an eye on the production process and suggest improvements, but as he might have expected, no one was very interested in what he had to say. Nevertheless, it was giving his body a chance to heal. He couldn’t sleep more than a few hours a day, and his hands had been giving him a very hard time.

“They told me it would take three months to get used to the shaking of those machines, but it never got better for me. It got so that I couldn’t even hold a fork.” For a while he couldn’t write at all and had a throbbing in his joints. “I can’t feel the skin in my forearms,” he told me once, with an almost clinical curiosity.

He was impatient to recover his reflexes because he was planning to begin flight training in September. It would be a year since he had arrived in the United States, and he had finally saved the money for the first phase of the course. The lawyer that had arranged his visa suggested that he might qualify for an employment-based visa once he was a certified pilot. Jean-Paul talked about his ordeal on the shop floor at Pagel Brothers as a test from God that he had finally passed. “I couldn’t have done it without Mike,” he said, “and the other friends that I’ve made here. And my brother, who has done more than his fair share helping my mother at home.” He was certain that things would get better for him. It was the others he worried about.

Why were the Pagel Brothers producing so much during a recession? The manufacturing sector in the United States has been in decline for decades, what economists call a “stylized fact”—a statistical trend that is consistent enough to be accepted as true.²⁷ According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), employment in goods-producing industries peaked in 1979 and has been losing ground to services ever since.²⁸ More than 4 million manufacturing jobs evaporated between 2000 and 2008, a trend that accelerated during the recession. January 2009 showed the largest manufacturing job loss in more than thirty years. Metal fabrication was

²⁷ James Scott elaborates on the centrality of “stylized state facts” to the legibility function of the state. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 79–80.

²⁸ Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Current Employment Statistics Survey: 100 years of Employment Hours, and Earnings,” Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Monthly Labor Review* (August 2016).

second only to the auto industry in this regard, losing 13 percent of its workforce.²⁹ Orders flatlined for small- and medium-sized factories like the Pagel Brothers, and thousands went bankrupt.³⁰ Yet by late 2011, the demand for durable goods had bounced back with surprising vigor compared with past recessions, surpassing its pre-recession level.

Jean-Paul was employed during this period of brutal competition. For the fabricated metals industry, the recession was followed by the acceleration and streamlining of production processes, eliminating bottlenecks and reducing delivery times as the surviving companies vied for new customers. The subprime mortgage crisis had tightened the availability of commercial credit, forcing small shops to rely on low-wage labor to stay in business. Industry publications indicated that this was a temporary phase in a process of long-term revival. As capital became available, companies would be able to invest heavily in robotics by taking out loans or taking on private equity investors. Eventually, larger firms would buy smaller ones, consolidating an industry long dominated by small, locally-owned producers.³¹ “The future of metal fabrication in the United States gleams with hope and promising trends for fabricators and their customers,” blogged the owner of a metalworking factory in April 2013.³²

²⁹ Megan M. Barker, “Manufacturing Employment Hard Hit During the 2007-9 Recession,” Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Monthly Labor Review* (April 2011): 30.

³⁰ The Pagel Brothers (a pseudonym to protect informant confidentiality) is an Original Equipment Manufacturer (OEM) contractor, producing parts and equipment for a range of clients in the telecommunications, transportation, energy, medical equipment, and industrial manufacturing sectors. As its name suggests, it is a family business that was founded in the mid-90s and has been owner-operated ever since. Because it is a private company, its tax forms are not publicly available; the financial statement of the village in which it is located, as well as public websites such as Bloomberg, Buzzfile, ZoomInfo, and Glassdoor, report between \$10–\$25.5 million in revenues, and between 45 and 200 employees.

³¹ Tim Heston, “2014 Forecast: The Big Question Mark,” *The Fabricator*, December 1, 2013; Fabricators and Manufacturers Association, *Q1 Forming and Fabricating Job Shop Consumption Report*, April 29, 2015.

³² Mike Bowlby, “The Future of Metal fabrication in the United States,” Manufacturing Best Practices, September 6, 2013, <https://www.bestmanufacturingpractices.com/2013/09/the-future-of-metal-fabrication-in-the-united-states/>.

Some policymakers and pundits saw a “manufacturing renaissance” on the horizon. In July 2013, Gene Sperling, director of the National Economic Council under President Obama, gave an address at the Brookings Institute identifying post-recession job growth, integrated supply chains, and technological innovation as indicators of industrial competitiveness.³³ “Renaissance or not,” concluded a 2014 report by the U.S. Department of Commerce, “evidence abounds that U.S. manufacturing has emerged out of the recession with renewed strength.”³⁴ Lower energy costs due to the “reshoring” of shale oil and natural gas production combined with a brief reduction in the trade deficit with China were giving industry a boost.³⁵ “Many factors are involved,” explained Ronald A. Wirtz of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, “including a bounce-back in orders stemming from steep inventory cutbacks during the recession, strong exports and some evidence that more orders are being filled in the United States rather than elsewhere—all of it facilitated by a seemingly manic focus on productivity and adding value to products, courtesy of the recession.”³⁶ In his survey of owner-operated companies in the upper Midwest, Wirtz noted that companies were managing to produce more without hiring more workers. He interpreted this as a sign of greater productivity, the salutary consequence of a brutal evolutionary stage during which owners were forced “to reevaluate products, processes and personnel from top to bottom,” forging leaner and more efficient operations with more

³³ Gene Sperling, “The Case for a Manufacturing Renaissance,” *Brookings Institution*, July 25, 2013.

³⁴ Jessica R. Nicholson and Ryan Noonan, *Manufacturing Since the Great Recession*, Economics and Statistics Administration Issue Brief 02-14, U.S. Department of Commerce, June 10, 2014, 15.

³⁵ From 2008 and 2009, the U.S. trade deficit in transportation equipment and primary and fabricated metals shrank by 70 percent and 57 percent respectively, reflecting dollar depreciation, a decline in demand for imports, and a shortage of trade financing. See Congressional Research Service, “The U.S. Trade Deficit: Causes, Consequences, and Policy Options,” Washington DC, July 12, 2010.

³⁶ See Ronald A. Wirtz, “Manufacturing an Uptick,” *Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis*, October 24, 2012.

competitive products.³⁷

Skeptics countered that the cyclical recovery of durable goods indicated neither productivity gains nor future employment. On the contrary, the fact that 87 percent of the 653,000 new manufacturing jobs between 2010 and 2014 were in transportation, fabricated metal products, and machinery demonstrated weakness in the production of nondurable goods such as food, clothing, and chemicals. Like services, nondurable manufacturing tended to decline more gradually and recover more slowly during recessionary periods. In fact, many occupational categories in both of these sectors never regained pre-recession employment levels.³⁸ Significantly, Jean-Paul's experience at Pagel Brothers also indicated the unreliability of employment statistics in any sector. Wirtz witnessed manic activity on shop floors without considering the degree to which employers reduced labor costs by relying on poorly paid contract workers who could be hired and fired without notice. Because the BLS classifies temporary agencies as "professional and business services," official statistics count fewer workers, better wages, and higher productivity than would otherwise be the case.³⁹ Half of the

³⁷ This observation was consistent with a study of 23,000 employees of a single large firm with factories across the United States. Finding that output-per-worker rose by 5.4 percent during the Recession, the researchers conclude that productivity gains were the result of an increase in effort, or "making do with less." These results correlated with the increase in local unemployment rates, suggesting that workers were motivated by "the costs of losing a job." Edward P. Lazear et al., "Making Do with Less: Working Harder during Recessions," *Journal of Labor Economics* 34, no. 1 (2016): S333–S360.

³⁸ Nicholson, *Manufacturing Since the Great Recession*, 10. Between 2009 and 2019, a 24 percent increase in output was accompanied by a 12 percent increase in manufacturing jobs. Marc Levinson, "Job Creation in the Manufacturing Revival," Congressional Research Service, July 19, 2019, 2. Up-to-date charts on employment levels by sector are posted by the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, at <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/>.

³⁹ A recent study found that temporary services employ 9.7 percent of the workers in manufacturing. Matthew Dey et al., "Manufacturers' Outsourcing to Temporary Help Services: A Research Update," (Working Paper 493, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). Also see Matthew Dey et al., "Manufacturers' Outsourcing to Staffing Services," *International Labour Review* 65, no. 3 (2012): 533–59; and Karen Kosanovich, "A Look at Contingent Workers," U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, September 2018. The last article shows that contingent workers are paid 77 percent of a permanent employee's wage, are less likely to have health insurance, and are more likely to be Latino or Asian than black or white. However, it does

temporary workers in manufacturing and one-third of all production workers supplement earnings with Food Stamps or other federal assistance.⁴⁰ This income gap between a small corps of skilled employees and a fluctuating number of temporary line workers reflects the changing occupational mix as producers automate to reduce labor costs, suggesting that overall employment in manufacturing will continue to decline.⁴¹

Another problem with official labor statistics is their failure to account for unauthorized employment. It is an open secret that undocumented migrants are shock absorbers in stratified labor markets. During periods of expansion, they take the “dirty, dangerous and demeaning jobs” that are unappealing to citizens and permanent residents with better jobs.⁴² During periods of contraction, they tolerate substandard wages when more expensive workers are laid off and become eligible for unemployment benefits. While it is impossible to determine how many workers lack authorization, demographers estimated in 2018 that they accounted for about 5 percent of the total workforce. However, they accounted for more than half of all agricultural field workers and were critical for construction, domestic services, and the hospitality industry.⁴³ Undocumented workers are traditionally identified through personal networks and are either paid

not include immigration data. For an overview of the history, scope, and general characteristics of nonstandard employment in the United States, see Arne L. Kalleberg, “Nonstandard Employment Relations: Part-time, Temporary and Contract Work,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000): 341–65.

⁴⁰ Ken Jacobs et al., *Producing Poverty: The Public Cost of Low-wage Production Jobs in Manufacturing* (Research Brief, University of California Berkeley Center for Labor Research and Education, May 2016).

⁴¹ See Levinson, “Job Creation in the Manufacturing Revival,” 5–6.

⁴² Ryszard Cholewinski and Patrick Taran, “Migration, Governance and Human Rights: Contemporary Dilemmas in the Era of Globalization,” *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (2010): 1–33.

⁴³ Jeffrey Passel, the leading demographer on immigration trends in the United States, estimated in 2018 that about eight million of the nearly 11 million undocumented immigrants in the United States—down from a high of 12.2 million in 2007—participated in the labor force. This decline was attributed to a sharp decrease in the number of Mexicans entering without authorization. Only Central American immigration increased during this period; no statistically significant change was found in migration from Africa, the Caribbean, and Asia. The report of these findings describes its statistical methodology in detail. Jeffrey S. Passel and D’Vera Cohn, “U.S. Unauthorized Immigrant Total Dips to Lowest Level in a Decade,” *Pew Research Center*, November 27, 2018.

under the table or processed for payroll with counterfeit immigration documents. With more immigration enforcement, however, temporary employment agencies have become a lucrative niche for entrepreneurs willing to assume the personnel risks associated with hiring at the bottom of the pay scale.⁴⁴ Pagel Brothers's management was not concerned with the immigration status, skill level, or safety of contract workers because they were not, strictly speaking, Pagel Brothers's employees. This was an attractive option for small manufacturers who were transitioning from an experienced, permanent workforce to an automated production process, which substituted labor with fixed capital to create returns that need not be shared with workers.⁴⁵

While replacing workers with machines may boost profits for individual producers in the short-term, "Solow's paradox" haunts efforts to assess the aggregate impact of automation. "You can see the computer age everywhere but in the productivity statistics," remarked Robert Solow in 1987.⁴⁶ Understood as the ratio of input to output in production, productivity should accompany improvements in information technology and a reduced demand for labor. Yet Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the monetary measure of a country's total goods and services, has been losing momentum for decades, particularly in countries with the most advanced

⁴⁴ See Tim Henderson, "More Employers May Be Using Temps to Skirt Immigration Laws," *Stateline*, August 16, 2017.

⁴⁵ Economists Loukas Karabarbounis and Brent Neiman argue that half of the global decline in the labor share of GDP is the result of technological displacement, particularly by computers and software. "The Global Decline of the Labor Share," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 129, no. 1 (2014): 61–103. For a thoughtful investigation into the implications of this argument for the United States, see Derek Thompson, "A World Without Work," *The Atlantic* 316, no. 1 (2015): 50–61. Thompson points out that in 1964, AT&T was the country's most valuable company, worth \$267 billion and employing 758,611 people. In 2015, Google enjoyed that position at \$370 billion with 55,000 employees. Meanwhile, the number of unemployed 25–54-year-old men has doubled since the late 1970s. Between 2000 and 2015, manufacturing jobs declined by 30 percent and real wages of recent graduates fell by 7.7 percent. While more people are pursuing higher education, the job market also seems to be requiring more preparation for lower starting wages.

⁴⁶ Robert Solow, "We'd Better Watch Out," *New York Times Book Review*, July 12, 1987.

technologies.⁴⁷ In fact, recent studies challenge output measurements, finding that the differential rise in production per worker has been driven by computer-producing rather than computer-using industries, and these estimates are inflated by falling prices in the computer industry.⁴⁸ These findings support Thomas Piketty's argument that the rate of return on capital exceeds the rate of growth in postindustrial economies, a trend that has been obscured by disparities in compensation within and across industries. "For countries at the world technological frontier—and thus ultimately for the planet as a whole—there is ample reason to believe that the growth rate will not exceed 1–1.5 percent in the long run," Piketty predicts, "no matter what economic policies are adopted."⁴⁹

The declining labor share of national income has sparked debates regarding the meaning of GDP and its relation to productivity. Simon Kuznets warned Congress in 1934 that the reduction of economic complexity to a set of discrete measures would lead to scientific oversimplification and political manipulation.⁵⁰ As he predicted, the interpretation of labor

⁴⁷ This is the case in spite of the dramatic expansion of China's productive capacity since the 1990s. "Trade has been growing more slowly not only because economic growth has become less trade-intensive, but also because global growth is slower." Mary Hallward-Driemeier and Gaurav Nayyar, *Trouble in the Making The Future of Manufacturing-Led Development* (Washington DC: World Bank Group, 2018), 81. Also see Dani Rodrik, "Premature Deindustrialization," *Journal of Economic Growth* 21, no. 1 (2016): 1–33.

⁴⁸ Daron Acemoglu et al., "Return of the Solow Paradox? IT, Productivity, and Employment in us Manufacturing," *American Economic Review* 104, no. 5 (2014): 394–99; Susan Houseman, "Outsourcing, Offshoring and Productivity Measurement in United States Manufacturing," *International Labour Review* 146, nos. 1-2 (2007): 61–80.

⁴⁹ Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. By Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2014), 398.

⁵⁰ "The valuable capacity of the human mind to simplify a complex situation in a compact characterization becomes dangerous when not controlled in terms of definitely stated criteria. With quantitative measurements especially, the definiteness of the result suggests, often misleadingly, a precision and simplicity in the outlines of the object measured. Measurements of national income are subject to this type of illusion and resulting abuse, especially since they deal with matters that are the center of conflict of opposing social groups where the effectiveness of an argument is often contingent upon oversimplification." Simon Kuznets, *National Income, 1929-1932*, 73rd US Congress, Second Session, Senate Document Number 124, 1934, 5–7. On the history and politics of GDP measurement, see

statistics relies heavily on the accuracy of databases that cannot capture dominant trends of self-employment, informalization, and automation.⁵¹ In addition, the methodological nationalism of data collection and analysis obscures the relation between production and profit within a system of global supply and demand.⁵² Output statistics do not capture the arbitrage effects of intermediate inputs from low-wage countries. “When a company outsources road transport services to a domestic contract firm, labor services to a temporary help agency, information technology (IT) services to a foreign affiliate, and the production of a material input to a foreign company,” explains labor economist Susan Houseman, “the industry or country in which the tasks are performed changes, along, generally, with the individuals performing the tasks.”⁵³ Nor do productivity measures capture the sale and consumption of goods in foreign markets. In short, the appearance of greater labor efficiency since the mid-1990s may be the combined effect of stagnating growth, global supply chains, and conventions of national data collection and measurement. In other words, changes in the mode of production challenge the coherence of

Diane Coyle, *GDP: A Brief but Affectionate History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014); Philipp Lepenies, *The Power of a Single Number* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016); and Jeroen CJM van den Bergh, *Abolishing GDP*, (Tinbergen Institute Discussion Paper 019/3, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, 2007).

⁵¹ Based on data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics; for example, the declining labor share of income in the U.S. is an effect of the “compensation-productivity gap” caused by technology-based enhancements in productivity. Susan Fleck et al., “The Compensation-Productivity Gap: A Visual Essay,” *Monthly Labor Review* (January 2011). Disaggregating data across a number of data sets, on the other hand, IMF researchers of labor income share in the U.S. relates technological change to the offshoring potential of occupational tasks, trade, and labor market institutions. Yasser Abdih and Danninger, *What Explains the Decline of the U.S. Labor Share of Income? An Analysis of State and Industry Level Data*, (IMF Working Paper 167, International Monetary Fund, Washington, DC, 2017). A recent ILO household survey spanning 2004–2017 across ninety-five countries finds that the decline of the labor income share is both global and heterogeneous, the prevalence of self-employment—accounting for half of the global workforce—“highlighting limitations of widely used rules of thumb.” International Labour Office, *The Global Labour Income Share and Distribution, Data Production and Analysis Unit* (Geneva, Switzerland: International Labour Organization, 2019).

⁵² Erin Lockwood, “The International Political Economy of Global Inequality,” *Review of International Political Economy*, June 12, 2020.

⁵³ Susan Houseman, “Outsourcing, Offshoring and Productivity Measurement,” 61.

concepts—such as employment rate, productivity, and economic growth—that are axioms of the macroeconomic framework.

Jean-Claude’s experience at Pagel Brothers demonstrates how the complexity of the global terrain intensified competition among both producers and their employees. Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEMs) like Sprint, Verizon, and Apple hire contract manufacturers like Pagel Brothers in order to outsource the risks associated with quality control, fixed capital investments, and human resources. These contractors, in turn, have increasingly outsourced personnel functions in order to compensate for the cost of robotic upgrades, directly employing only enough skilled workers to maintain the machines.⁵⁴ Temporary labor services avoid the “negative externalities” of compliance with immigration, occupational health and safety, and wage and hour laws. In this way, domestic manufacturing remains viable as competitors relocate operations overseas, where labor is cheaper and regulation lax or nonexistent. In this respect, domestic suppliers are as globalized as foreign contractors and off-shore facilities owned and operated by U.S.-based companies. Indeed, investment of foreign capital has boosted the export market for goods manufactured in the U.S., further blurring national economic boundaries.⁵⁵ Free trade advocates argue that the integration of global supply chains increases output, encourages innovation, and ultimately lifts all boats, both at home and abroad.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Employers complained that they were unable to find workers with adequate skills, even at the height of post-recession unemployment. In Elka Torpey, “Got Skills? Think manufacturing”—A “Career Outlook” by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014)—the language of the piece resembles a recruitment pamphlet yet admits that “manufacturing employment has fluctuated over the past 75 years and is expected to continue declining.” Also see Sree Ramaswamy et al., “Making It in America: Revitalizing US Manufacturing,” McKinsey Global Institute, McKinsey and Company, 2017; and Cliff Waldman, “Automation Investment in US Manufacturing: An Empirical Picture,” MAPI Foundation (Arlington, VA: Manufacturers Alliance for Productivity and Innovation, 2016).

⁵⁵ According to the U.S. Department of Commerce, majority foreign-owned firms operating in the U.S. contributed 25 percent of total exports in 2017. See <https://www.selectusa.gov/FDI-global-market>.

⁵⁶ Theodore H. Moran and Lindsay Oldenski, “The US Manufacturing Base: Four Signs of Strength,” (Policy Brief 14-18, Peterson Institute for International Economics, Washington, DC, 2014)

Nationalists accuse them of “torturing the data” to mask secular decline in manufacturing caused by trade deficits.⁵⁷ No one disputes, however, that with the decline of industrial production relative to services, factory jobs ceased to be a ladder to the middle class.⁵⁸

Derivative Globalization

It is no coincidence that just as the purchasing power of the wage began its long decline, two developments in the international monetary system were transforming the economic landscape. First, the quantity of dollars circulating as the world’s reserve currency caused the U.S. government to sever its link to gold. In 1971 the Nixon Administration formalized what was already a *de facto* regime of floating exchange rates. In a 1972 address, Milton Friedman reassured members of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange that the rigid system of stable

⁵⁷ Adams B. Nager and Robert D. Atkinson, *The Myth of America’s Manufacturing Renaissance: The Real State of US Manufacturing* (Washington, DC: The Innovation Technology and Innovation Foundation, 2015), 16–17. The authors reference an oft-quoted remark by Chicago School economist Ronald Coase, in a playful reference to historian of science Thomas Kuhn: “I remarked earlier on the tendency of economists to get the result their theory tells them to expect If you torture the data enough, nature will always confess, a saying which, in a somewhat altered form, has taken its place in the statistical literature.” Kuhn puts the point more elegantly and makes the process sound more like a seduction: “Nature undoubtedly responds to the theoretical predispositions with which she is approached by the measuring scientist.” Ronald H. Coase, *How Should Economists Choose?* (Washington, DC: The Warren Nutter Lectures in Political Economy, American Enterprise Institute, 1982).

⁵⁸ There is some disagreement regarding the comparative benefits of manufacturing jobs. “In some occupations, workers have higher wages in manufacturing than they do in other industries,” writes Torpey “Got Skills?” 10. Others have noted the emergence of a two-tier workforce, in which real wages have deteriorated for temporary workers while stagnating or even shrinking for regular employees. Sree Ramaswamy et al., “Making It in America,” 5. According to Levinson, “Although workers in some manufacturing industries earn relatively high wages, the assertion that the manufacturing sector as a whole provides better wages and benefits than the rest of the economy is increasingly difficult to defend.” Levinson, “Job Creation in the Manufacturing Revival,” 10. Ethnographic treatments of deindustrialization in the U.S. include Christine Walley, *Exit Zero: Family and Class in Postindustrial Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Katherine S. Newman, *Falling from Grace: Downward Mobility in the Age of Affluence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); and Kathryn Dudley, *The End of the Line: Lost Jobs, New Lives in Postindustrial America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

currencies, subject to the control of central banks, was being replaced by a stable system of flexible currencies that would regulate itself. Not only would futures trading provide a means for investors to hedge the risk of fluctuation, he promised, but speculation would actually stabilize markets through its arbitrage effects, creating a new industry. “As Britain demonstrated in the nineteenth century,” he remarked, “financial services of all kinds can be a highly profitable export commodity.”⁵⁹ Fischer Black, Myron Scholes, and Robert Merton delivered on Friedman’s prediction the following year with the second groundbreaking development, a mathematical model allowing for risk-free pricing of derivative options against corporate liabilities.⁶⁰ This formula actualized the potential of Harry Markowitz’s portfolio theory, an equilibrium model introduced in 1952, as a technology to manufacture risk-free assets.⁶¹

Mathematically delinked from the material commodity that serves as its foundation, derivatives convert the expectation of supply and demand into an investment vehicle itself. In primary financial markets, past performance and future prospects of companies are reflected in the prices of stocks and bonds as a fluctuating quantity of risk. In secondary markets, these prices themselves are also traded as units of time under the controlled conditions of electronic trading. By calculating a statistical variable from the uncertain movement of prices, derivatives are manufactured in secondary markets that arbitrage the risk of primary markets nearly out of existence, protecting the investor from credit default or a decline in value. In other words,

⁵⁹ Milton Friedman, “The Need for Futures Markets in Currencies,” in *The Futures Markets in Foreign Currencies* (Chicago: International Monetary Market of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, 1972), 6–12.

⁶⁰ Fischer Black and Myron Scholes, “The Pricing of Options and Corporate Liabilities,” *Journal of Political Economy* 81, no. 3 (1973): 637–54; and Robert C. Merton, “Theory of Rational Option Pricing,” *Bell Journal of Economics and Management Science* 4, no. 1 (1973): 141–83.

⁶¹ Perry Mehrling, *The New Lombard Street: How the Fed Became the Dealer of Last Resort* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); Donald MacKenzie, *An Engine Not a Camera* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

derivatives are monetized units of time that “cash in” on indeterminacy. Within a decade, financial instruments engineered with these tools had created a platform for the expansion of global trade with the dollar as its center of gravity.

The geopolitics of monetarism were not a foregone conclusion. During its wealthiest years, economic life in the United States was dominated by managerial corporations organized less to maximize gain than to balance the interests of multiple constituencies. In their 1932 study of corporate governance, Adolf Berle and Gardiner Means describe a quasi-public institution made possible by the “dissolution of the atom of property” into nominal, dispersed ownership that is separated from the locus of executive control.⁶² This “corporate revolution” shifted the balance of power from the owners to the operators of an enterprise, subverting the shareholders’ claim on the profits. “The only example of a similar subjection of the economic interests of the individual to those of a group which appears to the writers as being at all comparable, is that contained in the communist system,” they wrote, surfacing the political stakes of their argument.⁶³ In the age of the modern corporation, Smithian concepts such as property, wealth,

⁶² Adolph Berle and Gardiner Means, *The Modern Corporation and Private Property* (New York: MacMillan, 1932), 8. A Wall Street corporate lawyer and “mugwump Republican” during the 1920s, Berle was distressed enough by irresponsible speculation to become a close advisor to Franklin Delano Roosevelt. He was a key contributor to FDR’s new “economic constitutional order” in response to the stock market crash and ensuing Depression. Richard Parker, “The Crisis Last Time,” *New York Times*, November 7, 2008.

⁶³ Berle and Means, *The Modern Corporation*, vii, 278. It is interesting to note that explicit formulation does not appear in a revised version of the book, published at the height of the Cold War. *The Modern Corporation and Private Property* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1991). Keynes likewise referred to the corporation as structurally anti-capitalist: “One of the most interesting and unnoticed developments of recent decades has been the tendency of big enterprise to socialise itself. A point arrives in the growth of a big institution—particularly a big railway or big public utility enterprise, but also a big bank or a big insurance company—at which the owners of the capital, i.e., its shareholders, are almost entirely dissociated from the management, with the result that the direct personal interest of the latter in the making of great profit becomes quite secondary. When this stage is reached, the general stability and reputation of the institution are more considered by the management than the maximum of profit for the shareholders.” John Maynard Keynes, “The End of Laissez-Faire,” in *Essays in Persuasion* (London: Macmillan, 1931), 186–212. Marxist apostate James Burnham would leverage Berle and Means’s

profit, and competition had become obsolete.⁶⁴ The stock market had transformed the ownership of private enterprise into a shareholding public, a form of privatized communism.⁶⁵ Furthermore, neither this diffuse multitude of shareholders nor the professional managerial elite adequately represented the larger interests of society.⁶⁶ To assert one against the other by contrasting free enterprise with the Soviet state was to disregard the social pressures demanding a new form of social organization. The great challenge of corporate and political governance, they argued, was to develop the potential for economic governance within the corporate form itself.

The New Deal reforms that were the legacy of this progressive agenda constrained the role of finance in the economy, setting the stage for three decades of unprecedented social security. Commercial banks, partitioned from investment banks, were held to strict reserve requirements and prohibited from owning stocks or dealing in securities.⁶⁷ Deposits were insured by the government through the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) while interest rates were capped for consumer loans, and mortgages were provided through Savings and Loan institutions. The mortgage industry was further insulated from market pressures by the government-sponsored organization Fannie Mae, which lowered the cost of lending by assuming the risk of standardized loans. The Social Security Act of 1935 established a social safety net for

argument into a broad-based attack on the socialist tendencies of American capitalism in *The Managerial Revolution* (New York: John Day, 1941). C. Wright Mills, on the other hand, was concerned that those same tendencies were a sign of fascism. C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1956).

⁶⁴ Berle and Means, 345–51.

⁶⁵ Karl Marx also noted that the formation of stock companies leads to the separation of owner and manager. “It is the abolition of capital as private property within the framework of capitalist production itself,” he annotated in his unfinished manuscript of the third volume of *Capital*. Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume III* (New York: International Publishers, 1981), 567.

⁶⁶ Berle and Means, *The Modern Corporation*, 356. Also see Karen Ho, *Liquidated*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

⁶⁷ Until the 1982 debt crisis, U.S. banks compensated for lost business in the U.S. by investing in postcolonial development projects. Gerald F. Davis, *Managed by the Markets: How Finance Re-Shaped America* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009), 113.

people who could not work, and the war effort effectively employed everyone else. After the war, a fiscal policy of “financial repression” controlled capital markets and managed government debt with low interest rates.⁶⁸ Meanwhile, large corporations realized unprecedented profits by exploiting economies of scale and scope, providing a stable workforce with the means and the confidence to consume what it produced.⁶⁹ Flush with cash and self-financing, essentially banking on themselves, the “visible hand” of managerial hierarchy had seized control of the production process, establishing new norms of administrative coordination that disciplined laissez-faire opportunism.⁷⁰

Thirty years later, the Washington Consensus promoted American capitalism as the apotheosis of the self-regulating market in which competitive, self-interested behavior generated a state of general equilibrium. However dramatic this reversal, its operational kernel was actually embedded in New Deal banking reforms that centralized the market system around the Federal Reserve.⁷¹ It became the Fed’s responsibility to correct capital asset pricing by regulating an open market in Treasury bonds, allowing credit expansion while preventing inflation and the speculation that came with it. Monetarists hoped that increasing the money supply would be

⁶⁸ Carmen M. Reinhart and M. Belen Sbrancia, “The Liquidation of Government Debt,” (Working Paper 16893, National Bureau of Economic Research, Washington, DC, 2011).

⁶⁹ “Financial repression” is from Alfred D Chandler, *Scale and Scope: The Dynamics of Industrial Capitalism* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1994).

⁷⁰ Alfred D. Chandler, *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1977).

⁷¹ When the Federal Reserve System was established in 1913, the United States had not had a central bank since 1836. The Fed’s initial objective was to providing a routine mechanism for the circulation of inter-bank currency reserves. During World War I, it was dedicated to supporting the market for government debt. After the war, the Fed managed the availability of credit by providing liquidity support for “open market operations” in Treasury securities. Consistently low interest rates, intended to even out seasonal cycles while reducing reliance on the global gold market, encouraged a speculative bubble that exploded in October 1929. The Banking Act of 1935 reined in shadow banking by expanding the Fed’s role as “dealer of last resort” with the power to discount any sound asset, including commercial loans and private securities. “The effect, as one observer later pointed out, was to eliminate any distinction between liquidity and solvency.” See Perry Mehrling, *The New Lombard Street*, 44.

enough to restore capital liquidity during the Great Depression. When this approach failed, Keynesian fiscal policies sought to stimulate aggregate demand through government spending. The war suspended this contest in favor of wage and price controls “to promote maximum employment, production, and purchasing power,” as stated in the Employment Act of 1946.⁷² For decades, the Fed served as the country’s investment banker, using policy to help the market approach ideal outcomes by creating arbitrage opportunities for private investors.⁷³ Monetarists and Keynesians may have disagreed on strategies but not the ideal: the asymptotic goal of market equilibrium.⁷⁴

Thus, financialization was a possibility, dormant during the managerial period, that was actualized through a series of political responses to unprecedented situations. As postwar reconstruction began to slow down, the institutional restrictions of the managed economy intensified competition for credit with perverse effects for the consumers they were designed to help. In a “credit short and capital starved world,” high interest rates that were intended to curb runaway inflation actually created more inflation as consumers spent and borrowed more to hedge the fluctuating value of their deposits.⁷⁵ Price ceilings on municipal bonds, mortgages, and consumer deposits put cities and Savings and Loans at a disadvantage, particularly when government agencies and commercial banks invented workarounds. Certificates of deposits,

⁷² Mehrling, 52–53.

⁷³ As Keynesian economist Alvin Hansen wrote in 1938: “Governments all over the world are in the process of becoming intermediaries between the ultimate savers and investment outlets, but the process of production is still carried on by private enterprise. This is neither socialism in production nor even in the ownership of wealth. The government is becoming an investment banker.” Quoted in Mehrling, 46.

⁷⁴ Both Keynesians and monetarists were influenced by the theory introduced by Leon Walras in 1874 according to which all markets tend towards equilibrium. See John Hicks, “Mr. Keynes and the ‘Classics’: A Suggested Interpretation,” *Econometrica* 5, no. 2 (1937): 147–59; and Milton Friedman, “A Monetary and Fiscal Framework for Economic Stability,” *American Economic Review* 38, no. 3 (1948): 245–64.

⁷⁵ Greta R. Krippner, *Capitalizing on Crisis: The Political Origins of the Rise of Finance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 59.

bank commercial paper, Eurodollar borrowing, and mortgage-backed securities were all mechanisms for arbitraging the difference between loan and money market rates of interest in order to create liquidity that the Fed could no longer provide. In the words of Hyman Minsky, “Capitalism is essentially a financial system, and the peculiar behavioral attributes of a capitalist economy center around the impact of finance on system behavior.”⁷⁶ So it was that monetarist policies of financial disintermediation—deregulating domestic finance during the 1970s and shifting from fiscal to monetary policy in the 1980s—appeared as necessary for market stabilization as had the Keynesian intermediation of the state during the Depression.

Most significant for the fate of workers, however, was the impact of financial disintermediation on corporate organization. High interest rates did not only tighten access to credit; they also undermined returns on productive investment relative to portfolio income such as dividends and capital gains from the stock market. As corporations witnessed declining profits, shareholders disciplined the “power elite” by spearheading a series of legislative and administrative reforms in the 1980s that created a market of corporate control.⁷⁷ Companies with a low share price on the stock market relative to the value of their assets in underlying markets were seized in an avalanche of hostile takeovers. Managerial performance was evaluated according to a strict standard of “shareholder value” and incentivized with stock options.⁷⁸ With the normalization of these practices, the model of the corporation as a company of members was

⁷⁶ Hyman Minsky, “Financial Intermediation in the Money and Capital Markets,” in *Issues in Banking and Monetary Analysis*, ed. G. Pontecorvo et al. (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1967), 33.

⁷⁷ Davis, *Managed by the Markets*, 44.

⁷⁸ Samuel Knafo and Sahil Jai Dutta argue that financialized techniques of governance were introduced by managers themselves, beginning in the 1960s, through conglomerates that acquired firms not to expand production, but as assets for leveraging debt to finance future cash flow. “The Myth of the Shareholder Revolution and the Financialization of the Firm,” *Review of International Political Economy* (August 2019).

replaced by a “nexus of contracts,” a legal fiction created to maximize shareholder returns.⁷⁹ New technologies and institutional practices expanded bond markets just as Asia’s rapidly expanding industrial sectors generated a growing supply of capital looking for outlets. Employers streamlined operations and began contracting overseas, and vertically-integrated firms—combining multiple functions within a single organization—became shifting, horizontally-integrated networks of specialized suppliers and intermediate producers, like Pagel Brothers, competing globally for short-term contracts that, responsive to market conditions, could dry up at any time. And as the race to cut costs intensified, immigrant workers became increasingly vital to economies worldwide.

In this way, a potent mix of institutional practice and ideological justification set the stage for the pervasive financialization of everyday life throughout the global economy. With the dismantling of Depression-era banking restrictions, the finance, insurance, and real estate (FIRE) sector became the primary driver of economic activity in the U.S. within a decade.⁸⁰ High-speed computers took the guesswork out of finance, operationalizing Friedrich Hayek’s notion of the market as information processor. The efficient market hypothesis, according to which asset prices reflect all available information, became common sense.⁸¹ New technologies of

⁷⁹ Michael C. Jensen and William H. Meckling, “Theory of the Firm: Managerial Behavior, Agency Costs and Ownership Structure,” *Journal of Financial Economics* 3 (1976): 305–60; Davis, *Managed by the Markets*, 21.

⁸⁰ In 1994, the Interstate Banking and Branching Efficiency Act triggered a wave of mergers and acquisitions among commercial banks. Five years later, the Financial Services Modernization Act of 1999 permitted the consolidation of investment and retail banks through financial holding companies. By 2005, the ten largest banks held nearly 40 percent of all domestic deposits and 51 percent of the industry’s assets. “Most striking is that the long-term trend prior to 1994 was low, no, or negative profits in the securities, commodities, and investments industry. Deregulation of banking and financialization of the economy seem to have been most influential in inflating banking sector profits. Insurance had weaker gains, and the security industry saw gains only after the 1999 Financial Services Modernization Act.” Donald Tomaskovic-Devey and Ken-Hou Lin, “Income Dynamics, Economic Rents, and the Financialization of the U.S. Economy,” *American Sociological Review* 76, no. 4 (2011): 549.

⁸¹ See Martha Poon, “From New Deal Institutions to Capital Markets: Commercial Consumer

securitization spread risk to a global pool of investors, justifying arguments that financial markets would improve on the gatekeeping function of central banks by depoliticizing the allocation of capital. Cheap credit, buoyed by the unprecedented extension of low interest rates, cushioned the effects of flat wages and a dissolving social safety net.⁸² Households took advantage of aggressively marketed financial services that allowed them to leverage their homes as assets, feeding the finance sector's insatiable demand for collateralized debt.⁸³

Entrepreneurialism, promoted as a model for community and international development, rationalized the capitalization of everything: talent, skills and experience, social connections, cultural practices, and even love.⁸⁴ "Finance, the management of money's ebbs and flows," wrote Randy Martin, "is not simply in the service of accessible wealth, but presents itself as a merger of business and life cycles, as a means for the acquisition of self."⁸⁵

Globalization is the universal appearance of finance as the possibility of a perfect market. While economics departments were teaching macroeconomics as a global competition of supply and demands, business schools trained applied mathematicians to design capital markets that produced their own wealth. When the 1973 OPEC embargo flooded the oil-producing countries

Risk Scores and the Making of Subprime Mortgage Finance," *Accounting, Organizations and Society* 34 (2009): 654–74; Melinda Cooper and Martijn Konings (2015), "Contingency and Foundation: Rethinking Money, Debt, and Finance after the Crisis," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 114, no. 2 (2015): 239–50; and Mehrling, *The New Lombard Street*, 61.

⁸² Paul Langley, *The Everyday Life of Global Finance* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁸³ Collateralized Debt Obligations (CDOs) bundle loan contracts into vehicles for investment. They are called "derivatives" because their value is derived from the credit risk of payments for the underlying assets. Any predictable income stream may serve as raw material for the construction of collateralized debt instruments, which are marketed at varying degrees of risk to add liquidity to a diversified portfolio. CDOs containing bad debt triggered the 2008 financial crisis. See Adam Tooze, *Crashed: How a Decade of Financial Crises Changed the World* (New York: Viking, 2008).

⁸⁴ John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, *Ethnicity, Inc.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); and Thrift, N., "The Capitalization of Almost Everything: The Future of Finance and Capitalism," *Theory, Culture and Society* 24, no. 7–8 (2007): 97–115.

⁸⁵ Randy Martin, *Financialization of Daily Life* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 3.

with cash they could not spend, it flowed into the U.S. economy in exchange for Treasury bonds. The inflationary impact of this global glut of dollars, exacerbated by Cold War spending on defense, forced Paul Volcker to raise interest rates in 1979. This was the *fait accompli* of late capitalism. Before Ronald Reagan popularized the ideological rationalization that would be called neoliberalism, the spike in the price of the dollar enriched national treasuries with dollar reserves and eviscerated debtor nations, setting into motion a self-reproducing cycle of global inequality. The winners in this unexpected twist of fate grew their economies and bought more Treasury bonds, dramatically expanding the supply of credit in the U.S. As Greta Krippner puts it, leaders “capitalized on crisis” by transferring inflation from the nonfinancial sectors of goods and services to global financial markets, where high asset prices translated into foreign exchange.⁸⁶ Even as interest rates fell, central banks abroad were willing to accept lower returns on accumulated dollar reserves in order to finance their exports to consumers in the United States. Those consumers, in turn, fed their appetite for those imports—even as they lost the stable jobs of the productive economy—by financing consumption through debt.

For believers in market equilibrium, the happy coincidence of the supply and demand for Treasury bonds indefinitely deferred the political problem of resource distribution. Heterodox observers like Minsky and Black, however, were not so mystical about the market. In 1986, Minsky argued that the conversion of corporations into financial institutions and their multinational control of rent-producing assets was accelerating the inherent instability of the global economy.⁸⁷ The same year, Black warned his colleagues that the utility function did not explain financial volatility. “Because value is not observable,” he pointed out, “it is possible for

⁸⁶ Krippner, *Capitalizing on Crisis*, 22.

⁸⁷ Hyman P. Minsky, *Stabilizing an Unstable Economy* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2008).

events that have no information content to affect price.”⁸⁸ In October of the following year, the first in a series of crashes indicated a divergence between corporate stock and their derivatives, the futures and options markets that index and arbitrage prices. With each crisis, a larger percentage of social wealth has been absorbed by the financial infrastructure in order to sustain liquidity. This global distribution of capital has deindustrialized financial centers and financed production elsewhere, which is why it is simplistic to blame migrant workers for depressing wages. Migrant networks are global supply chains within an emergent system that reduces wage-labor in certain countries, expands it in others, and accelerates urbanization and emigration everywhere else. All workers are self-employed, whatever their job or immigration status, seeking to leverage their capacities as assets in a glutted market without guarantees.

Empty Laws, Blind Markets

There was a time when Amina was trading on the good life. Beginning in the mid-90s, she made a good living selling African art, fashion jewelry, and sundresses at art fairs and music festivals. By the time I knew her, however, people just weren’t buying.

In the late summer of 2013, she hoped that earnings from the New Buffalo Michigan Ship and Shore Festival would make up for a lackluster season. We had gotten out of Chicago later than expected, and most of the vendors were already open for business when we arrived. At the entrance, retired members of the Lions Club slouched in their chairs behind a plywood counter, counting tickets.

“We have a booth,” Amina told them.

⁸⁸ Fischer Black, “Noise,” *The Journal of Finance* 41, no. 3 (1986): 533.

“You don’t have a booth!” One of them said with a toothy smile. Amina didn’t stop walking, but I looked back in disbelief. “Just fooling!” He waved at me, every bit the cheerful grandfather.

Amina’s stand was in the center, backed up against a chain-link fence, swathed in white sheets. She dropped her bags in the corner and began briskly unclamping the veil that had protected her investment from thieving eyes during the last fourteen hours. I helped Amina arrange rows of rings, earrings, sequined bracelets, and sunglasses on her front table. Everything was affordable, even for the pressed binge-shopper. There was a sale rack of \$10 dresses, but others ran to as much as \$35. A few erstwhile customers floated by, passing their hands over the cotton skirts that rippled in the warm lake wind. A group of middle-aged women come up to the table and started trying on jewelry. “How much is this one?” one of the women asked me. “That one is \$20,” Amina replied. “How about this one?” One of the other women asked, still addressing me. They were white, as was practically everyone in sight. “Ten dollars,” Amina replied.

When the women had moved on without making a purchase, the woman from the booth next door came over. “So you’ve got all the same stuff I’ve got.” She pointed at a faux turquoise necklace. “How much you selling this one for?”

“Twenty dollars.”

“Twenty, huh? That seems low to me. I’ve been getting twenty-five for it. That’s a good-selling item. I know where you got it, at that place on Clark in Chicago....”

“I actually bought it in China,” Amina said quietly.

“I know. All the stuff at the place on Clark is from China. I’ve got this one too. And I’m about to pick up this one and this one tomorrow morning on my way over here.”

“No,” Amina said, slightly louder. “I brought my merchandise back from China.”

This took our neighbor aback, but only for a moment. “Right from the source, huh? Well, wherever you got it, it’s the same as what I’ve got, and that’s not good for either of us, is it?”

“I just looked around, and there’s three other vendors selling jewelry. They should be more careful about that!” She began moving about our stall, examining the goods. “You’ve got a lot of other product, but all I’ve got is the jewelry. That’s all I sell. So I’ll tell you what. You hold back on the turquoise and the sequins, and I’ll let you do the bracelets. What do you say?”

Amina was clearly not thrilled with this arrangement. “That’s fine,” she said.

The woman smiled at her victory. “I think that’s the best thing, don’t you? I’m sorry if I’m blunt, but this is how I feed my kids. And to tell you the truth, I’m feeling irritated. Don’t really want to be here. You done this show before?”

Amina’s nod was guarded, noncommittal. “Yes, but not in a few years.”

The woman paced back and forth in front of our stall as she talked. “You know, ten years ago I was carrying all sterling silver and making good money everywhere I went. Now I can barely even move the crap for half the price. It hardly seems worth it. This is no way to make a living.” She glanced over and saw a couple lingering at her table. “Gotta go. I’m Jennifer, by the way.” She reached out and took my hand, then Amina’s. “She’s in charge,” I said, but she had already turned her attention to her customers, whom she somehow talked into a sale.

“I just don’t have the energy to work it like that anymore,” Amina said ruefully. She told me that there used to be camaraderie among the vendors at these events. “I used to go to this Harley Davidson festival in the middle of Wisconsin, where all these old men with long beards had families with children. I was the only black person, and it was perfectly fine.” Everything changed after the recession. Shoplifting went up, and she had to stop taking credit cards because

people would cancel payment when they got home. “Everybody suspects everybody these days. And it’s not just about race. Some people act like we don’t belong at the African American festivals, that we’re just there to make money. I see it in Africa too, between Soninke, Bambara, Tuareg, and Fula people. Wolof say they welcome everybody, but they do it too!”

Every time I staffed Amina’s tent, during the summers of 2012 through 2015, I detected signs of suspicion. During the recession the consumption of goods and services, long a defining feature of the U.S. economy, dropped to its lowest level since World War II, and it had not bounced back on the festival circuit.⁸⁹ Paradoxically, as Jean-Paul’s factory work accelerated, Amina’s retail business came to a standstill. Economists explained the sluggish recovery on expectations of low future income and the persistence of unemployment, particularly in the service sector, due to low aggregate demand. At least as important as this cycle of negative reinforcement, however, was the deflation of the market values in housing and financial wealth, dissolving the “wealth effect” of credit-powered consumption that had distributed buying power throughout the U.S. and beyond, in the form of migrant remittances.⁹⁰ Loss of confidence in the

⁸⁹ Stephanie Hugie Barello, “Consumer Spending and U.S. Employment from the 2007-2009 Recession through 2022,” Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Monthly Labor Review* (October 2014), 17. Government statistics showed a return to pre-recession levels of spending in 2011. However, consumption data do not disaggregate cost of housing, and foreclosures and a tighter mortgage market led to a 2.9 percent rise in rents over the course of 2013. The author did anticipate a higher saving rate; other researchers emphasized new spending priorities. “Consumers appear to be more focused on consuming based on need versus want; durables that yield value over the long term such as cars, furniture, and other household equipment, have eclipsed growth in temporary service-based consumption such as food services and accommodations.” La Vaughn Henry, “Consumer Spending Reflects New Priorities after the Recession,” *Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland*, February 5, 2014. Four years later, another report by the Bureau of Labor Statistics was less optimistic, despite apparently low unemployment, noting persistent long-term decline in labor force participation, long-term unemployment, and involuntary part-time employment. Evan Cunningham, “Great Recession, Great Recovery? Trends from the Current Population Survey,” Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Monthly Labor Review* (April 2018).

⁹⁰ A recent study found that the correlation between stock market wealth and employment was significant in “non-tradable” but not “tradable” industries—that is, any industry producing goods or services for sale abroad. This addresses to some degree the difference between Jean-Paul’s overwork and Amina’s underemployment in the years immediately following the recession. See Gabriel Chodorow-Reich, “Stock

future had a profound impact on shopping behaviors and the willingness to take on debt even among people who had not lost their jobs or their homes.⁹¹ The effect of this anxiety was not only economic; it had moral overtones. The financialization of everyday life during the 1990s coincided with the long-overdue realization of civil rights for marginalized people. Dismantling entrenched obstacles to homeownership, the standardization of actuarial risk and deregulation of subprime mortgages diversified access to credit for African Americans, immigrants, and low-income people.⁹² This asset base fueled broad-based consumption, charging the service economy with opportunities, and with them, social practices of diversity and tolerance that mirrored the commensurability of exchange relations. When the pyramid collapsed to expose the persistent inequality of underlying collateral, so did the appearance of shared prosperity.⁹³ And as the money and merchandise stopped flowing, so did casual trust, and racial, class, and ethnic resentments festered.

Market Wealth and the Real Economy: A Local Labor Market Approach,” *National Bureau of Economic Research*, February 12, 2020. “Financial asset price appreciation, the resulting wealth effect, and short-term rises in business activity fail to result in the advanced economies reaching ‘escape velocity’ where increased consumption produces a virtuous demand for additional domestic capacity and labor, which in turn sets wages and prices on a reflationary path.” Daniel Alpert, *The Age of Oversupply* (New York: Penguin, 2013), xiv. Also see Atif Mian and Amir Sufi, “Finance and Business Cycles: The Credit-Driven Household Demand Channel,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 32, no. 3 (2018): 31–58. Not surprisingly, remittance rates from migrants in the U.S. mirror growth in aggregate domestic consumption, in both sending and receiving countries. OECD, “International Migrant Remittances and their Role in Development,” in *International Migration Outlook* (Paris: OECD, 2006).

⁹¹ Mariacristina De Nardi et al., “Consumption and the Great Recession,” (Working Paper 17688, National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, MA, 2011).

⁹² Poon, “From New Deal Institutions;” Melinda Cooper, “Shadow Money and the Shadow Workforce: Rethinking Labor and Liquidity,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 114, no. 2 (2015): 396–423.

⁹³ Subprime lending constituted up to 70 percent of all new mortgages between 2003 and 2007. The availability of adjustable-rate, low collateral loans was predicated on the assumption that housing prices would rise indefinitely. After the bubble burst, millions of people were stranded with rising interest payments, little equity, and underwater mortgages, and in many cases unemployment and devastated retirement accounts. See David B. Grusky, Bruce Western, and Christopher Wimer, eds., *The Great Recession* (New York: Russell Sage, 2011).

In July 2015, Amina's youngest son Momar accompanied us to a festival in a hardscrabble suburb southwest of Chicago. Beginning in the 1990s, Palestinian and Latino immigrants, mostly families with small children, had taken advantage of affordable mortgages to buy their first homes there. Now the neighborhood was full of half-vacant strip malls, picture windows featuring "Proud Union Home" posters, and at least as many houses with bare windows, empty driveways, and overgrown lawns. After showing our laminated vendor pass at two checkpoints, we parked in the designated parking lot behind a high school only to be reprimanded by a policeman at the festival entrance for not having brought the signed contract with us as additional verification.

Amina was glad to see that tents with light and electricity had been provided for her \$200 entry fee but was concerned that the booths were set apart from the games and main attractions, which meant that people would have to go out of the way to find us. "Two weeks ago I took Momar to the Bastille Day Festival in Milwaukee. We made decent money, but the fee was so high that we barely broke even." She pointed at a family setting up nearby. "Those Ecuadorians. I know them. They're so hardworking, they go from show to show all summer and sleep in their van. I don't know how they do it." I asked her if she saw many familiar faces on the festival circuit. "Not so much anymore. This kind of thing is a supplement for a lot of people now, while the old timers know there's no real money to be made." She began unpacking sundresses from the cardboard box at her feet.

"It doesn't look like a sundress kind of crowd," I observed, lining up sunglasses on the white tablecloth.

"Lots of jeans," she agreed.

A few minutes later, a blonde woman ran up to us waving a clipboard. “You don’t belong here!”

“I looked on the chart,” Amina replied.

“You should have waited for me. This isn’t your place. It’s his place.” A heavysset Latino man stood a few steps behind her, looking uncomfortable.

Calmly, Amina insisted on the evidence. For a moment, I thought the woman might lose her temper, but instead she spun on her heel and marched back towards the fieldhouse. “Stay here,” Amina ordered Momar, and then followed her. While we waited, music began blaring through speakers mounted over the nearby football field: heavy metal, country-and-western, and then a “redneck rap” satire with lyrics that were so racially loaded they made me squirm. “What do you think about the music?” I asked Momar, but he didn’t seem to notice. “I don’t know anything about this kind of music,” he said vaguely.

When Amina returned, she directed Momar to drag the dress-filled racks across the grass while we reloaded the van and moved to our new lot, even farther from the center of things. As we set up all over again, she seemed deflated and pessimistic that the effort was worth the trouble. Next door, a white woman in a long black dress with a Gaelic tattoo around her upper arm eyed us warily as we set out our wares. “You’re not going to leave that rack out there, are you?” she complained. “It doesn’t seem as though she has much merchandise,” we heard her tell another vendor.

“We’ve got to watch out for that one,” Amina whispered. “What do you bet she’s going to go complain about us? You’ve got to be careful or they won’t let you come back.”

“I’m hungry,” Momar announced, getting up from his chair. “Can I have some money?”

Amina had her eyes on a cluster of policemen across the way. They were talking to a South Asian man selling Blackhawks hockey shirts.

“Do you think they’re giving him a hard time?” I said after a minute or two. One of the policemen began to laugh. “Maybe they just want to buy Blackhawks’s shirts,” I ventured.

“Maybe,” she murmured. Eventually the policemen walked away, chatting among themselves. Momar remained standing, poised to move. Amina glanced at her phone. “Agnes Ndour just got here. Go help her set up. She’s got food.”

I walked with Momar to Agnes Ndour’s booth. It was much more modest than ours, with just a few dresses hanging from a clothesline tied to the beams of the tent. I bought a dress from her that was made from Malian mudcloth, which she told me later was one of the only sales of the day. The only booths attracting crowds were the Blackhawks shirts and a collection of puppies from the SPCA. We returned to Amina’s tent with Agnes Ndour’s son, who had some immigration questions for her. He had attained legal permanent residency through his African American wife and wanted to petition for a son who was currently living in France with his mother. He seemed nervous and unhappy to have driven all the way from the northwest suburbs for such meager returns. “Do you see those security guys?” he asked Amina, pointing towards the ticket takers at the gate. “They were just talking to the cops about a bully, this black kid they said was stealing tickets to get on the rides.” The lights from the Zipper and the Tilt-a-Whirl beckoned over the tents, but Amina never let Momar out of her sight.

Amina had gotten her start in retail trading by staffing a second cousin’s stall at the 125th Street market in Harlem. At first she was a college student working weekends, but after earning a two-year degree she decided to go into business for herself. An uncle who worked for Air France in Bamako sent her African art and textiles, which she sold at festivals up and down the East

Coast. She used these profits to buy a house and a business in Chicago, paying past support forward by inviting hair braiders and tailors to use her shop as a base for their own operations. This is a classic pattern of intergenerational self-employment among migrants.⁹⁴ Ethno-linguistic enclaves and transnational networks provide access to the information, credit, and logistical support that it takes to start a business and make it work, often by meeting a demand within the community itself.⁹⁵ Overhead and transaction costs are likely to be low, and lack of immigration status and English skills need not be obstacles to an income. More established and highly-skilled community members are called on to sponsor or even mentor newcomers as they build a referral network and identify business opportunities. Churches and mosques, hometown associations, and kinship relations operate like corporations, structuring entrepreneurial activities through binding commitments among suppliers and sellers, lenders and borrowers, owners and renters.

Self-employment can also protect migrants from xenophobic attitudes. I heard this rationale frequently from taxi and Uber drivers, often in the language of personal responsibility that is used against them.⁹⁶ “We are here to make our own way,” said Razak, a taxi driver from Mauritania. “I think sometimes that we are more American than the Americans!” Razak had first

⁹⁴ Migration scholars have consistently found that business ownership is higher among the foreign-born than the native-born. Robert Kloosterman and Jan Rath, “Immigrant Entrepreneurs in Advanced Economies: Mixed Embedness Further Explored,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 27, no. 2 (2001): 189–202; Min Zhou, “Revisiting Ethnic Entrepreneurship: Convergencies, Controversies, and Conceptual Advancements,” *International Migration Review* 38, no. 3 (2004): 1040–74. Caroline B. Brettell and Kristoffer E. Alstatt, “The Agency of Immigrant Entrepreneurs,” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 63 (2007): 383–97.

⁹⁵ Roger Waldinger, “Structural Opportunity or Ethnic Advantage? Immigrant Business Development in New York,” *International Migration Review* 23, no. 1 (1989): 48–72; Alejandro Portes and Jessica Yiu, “Entrepreneurship, Transnationalism, and Development,” *Migration Studies* 1, no. 1 (2013): 75–95. Networks need not be spatially centralized in enclaves, especially in the case of Africans. See Maude Toussaint-Comeau, “Do Ethnic Enclaves and Networks Promote Immigrant Self-Employment?” *Economic Perspectives* (4th Quarter 2008).

⁹⁶ See Mark Dudzic and Adolph Reed, Jr., “The Crisis of Labour and the Left in the United States,” *Socialist Register* 51 (2015): 351–75.

migrated to help with his sister's import-export business in Kansas City. When he decided to get married, he began driving to supplement his income. "It's expensive to live in two places at once!" he exclaimed, showing me pictures of his wife and two-year-old son, the house he had built, and the cattle he had bought in Noukchott. He relocated to Chicago in 2008, when his customers stopped buying. "There weren't so many Africans in Kansas City," he told me. "Black, white, nobody wanted us there."⁹⁷ He was driving for a taxi company, had just started with Uber, and was picking up gigs as a drummer and DJ on the weekends. Once the economy improved, he was planning to open a nightclub. "The Americans love my music, but I would never work for one." He sold me one of his CDs.

My informants often talked about their businesses as a personal choice. Yet self-employment was usually the default option—the option of no option—as it is for underemployed workers worldwide.⁹⁸ As Aaron Benanav points out, self-employed workers are able to create demand for their product at the expense of their incomes by reducing expenses as much as necessary to stay in the game.⁹⁹ The global expansion of the service sector is an effect of an abundant supply of surplus labor. Because labor is the largest expense for most businesses, the suppression of wages allows for the indefinite proliferation of entrepreneurial activity that creates its own demand. This was evident in Dakar and Bamako, where retail vendors in open-air markets and along major thoroughfares saturate the city with identical products, both new and used. Much of this work is "informal"; it provides neither tax revenue for the state nor labor

⁹⁷ Surveys correlate the 2008 Recession with an increase in xenophobic attitudes globally. See Joonghyun Kwak and Michael Wallace, "The Impact of the Great Recession on Perceived Immigrant Threat: A Cross-National Study of 22 Countries," *Societies* 8, no. 52 (2018).

⁹⁸ Loïc Wacquant, "Urban Marginality in the Coming Millennium," *Urban Studies* 36, no. 10 (1999): 1639–47; Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2006).

⁹⁹ Aaron Benanav, "Automation and the Future of Work, Part 2," *New Left Review* 120 (Nov-Dec 2019): 128.

protections for employees.¹⁰⁰ Even when it is recognized legally, however, such entrepreneurial activity is nonstandard insofar as its hours, duration, and relationships are not fixed by legal contract.¹⁰¹ Nonstandard work is economically viable by virtue of its precarity. On the other hand, the emergence of the “zero-hour contract” indicates that nonstandard self-employment is setting the standard in the service industry.¹⁰² The formalization of precarious work is evident in the glut of drivers self-employed as contractors to ride-share and delivery platforms such as Uber, Lyft, Amazon, and Grub-Hub.

On the festival circuit, the growing precarity of work in the United States—euphemized in terms of the creativity and independence of a “gig economy”—encounters an African informal economy that as both extension and shadow of Western capitalism, has long made markets to arbitrage differentials of wealth. Even before the transatlantic slave trade and colonialism, Africans exercised “the exit option” as merchants, seasonal workers, and settlers. Plentiful land and low population density encouraged dispersal, self-sufficiency, and acephalous social organization relying heavily on processes of collaboration rather than administrative

¹⁰⁰ The term “informal sector” was introduced by Saint Lucian economist W. Arthur Lewis to describe secondary labor markets that generated income through bargaining rather than competitive wages. Anthropologist Keith Hart developed the concept in the 1970s to explain survival strategies among Ghanaian rural-to-urban migrants. However, its importance would be underestimated by development agencies for decades. William Lewis, *The Theory of Economic Growth* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1955); Keith Hart, “Informal Income Opportunities and Urban Employment in Ghana,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 11, no. 1 (1973): 61–89; International Labour Organization, *Resolution Concerning Decent Work and the Informal Economy*, International Labor Conference, June 2002.

¹⁰¹ In 2016, the ILO estimated that almost 70 percent of employment in low- and middle-income regions was classed as informal. Barely a fifth of unemployed workers receive benefits worldwide. International Labour Organization, *Non-Standard Employment Around the World*. (Geneva, Switzerland: ILO, 2016).

¹⁰² Filmmaker Ken Loach’s 2019 “Sorry We Missed You” dramatizes the exploitation hidden within a British delivery driver’s “zero-hour contract,” which requires “self-employed,” low-wage workers to bear every on-the-job risk.

hierarchy.¹⁰³ This made it difficult for monarchies and colonial governments to command feudal or proletarian labor because social networks, maintained through trade and labor migrations, created alternative opportunities for people at every level of status to straddle forms of work.¹⁰⁴ When capitalism failed to deliver mass employment for Africans, structural adjustment reframed surplus labor as entrepreneurial “self-help,” which has translated into widespread reliance on microenterprise and remittances. As Anna Maria Makhulu argues, the unevenness of development in Africa has provided optimal conditions for the capture of financial wealth through speculation by households, foreign investors, and the state.¹⁰⁵ The circulation of credit through informal networks and the extension of debt-servicing as a development strategy have contributed to a trans-local economy of popular finance that sustains consumption in the absence of reliable wages.¹⁰⁶ The regular cash contributions of migrant workers support the liquidity of these monetary flows, particularly during periods of economic contraction.¹⁰⁷ Likewise, the real

¹⁰³ Igor Kopytoff, *The African Frontier: The Reproduction of Traditional African Societies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1987); Jeffrey Herbst, “Migration, the Politics of Protest, and State Consolidation in Africa,” *African Affairs* 89, no. 355 (1990): 183–203.

¹⁰⁴ Frederick Cooper, “Africa and the World Economy,” *African Studies Review* 24, nos. 2-3 (1981): 42–44. Michael J. Piore, *Birds of Passage: Migrant Labor and Industrial Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

¹⁰⁵ Anne-Maria Makhulu, “The Conditions for After Work: Financialization and Informalization in Posttransition South Africa,” *PMLA* 127, no. 4 (2012): 782–99.

¹⁰⁶ This is not only true of Africa, of course. See Verónica Gago, “Financialization of Popular Life and the Extractive Operations of Capital: A Perspective from Argentina,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 114, no. 1 (2015): 15. “Finance can be thought of as an opportunist system of understanding those exchanges produced from below. What finance reads or attempts to capture is the dynamic of subjects linked to the structuring of new entrepreneurial, self-managed labor forms arising from the poor sectors in parallel with their condemnation to excess or surplus populations. Finances also descend.”

¹⁰⁷ Both Makhulu and Gago are explicit about the importance of migrant networks in the emergence of popular practices of financialization. Economists have found that migrant workers respond to negative shocks to household income by increasing remittance flows. See C. Kenrick Hunte, “Workers’ Remittances, Remittance Decay and Financial Deepening in Developing Countries,” *The American Economist* 48, no. 2 (2004): 82–94.

estate and business investments of migrants, in communities of origin and residency, serve as collateral for income-generating schemes that sustain perceptions of upward mobility.

Nationals abroad send home three times more than countries receive in development aid. Estimating the unknown quantity of funds that reaches families through informal channels nearly doubles that figure.¹⁰⁸ Thus, enthusiasm for the development potential of remittances has been high among economists convinced of the equalizing effects of financialization. They point to the impact of increased cash flow on food security and commodity consumption, the education of girls, and the autonomy of women.¹⁰⁹ Remittance levels were more resilient during the recession than foreign direct investment (FDI), particularly in Africa.¹¹⁰ Remittances contribute both to GDP and the “financial deepening” of low-income countries, influencing exchange rate regimes throughout the Global South.¹¹¹ Skeptics question if such levels of transnational loyalty can persist over time and challenge the wisdom of relying on emigrant income to address problems

¹⁰⁸ The World Bank estimated \$21 billion in migrant remittances to sub-Saharan Africa in 2018. This represented an increase of almost 10 percent between 2017 and 2018. They account for approximately 9.6 percent of Senegal’s GDP, and 8.5 percent of Togo’s. Because many migrants transfer monetary and in-kind contributions through informal channels, official estimates are likely to be low. World Bank, *Migration and Remittances: Recent Developments and Outlook* (Washington, DC: World Bank Group, 2019). On the problems of measuring remittances, see Dilip Ratha et al., *Beyond Aid: New Sources and Innovative Mechanisms for Financing Development in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Policy Working Paper 4608, The World Bank, April 2008).

¹⁰⁹ Jeffrey H. Cohen, “Remittance Outcomes and Migration: Theoretical Contests, Real Opportunities,” *Studies in Comparative International Development* 40, no. 1 (2005): 88–112; Lisa Akesson, “Remittances and Inequality in Cape Verde: The Impact of Changing Family Organization,” *Global Networks* 9, no. 3 (2009): 381–98; Beth Bugenhagen, *Muslim Families in Global Senegal: Money Takes Care of Shame* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012).

¹¹⁰ Remittances declined only 5.5 percent in 2009 as compared with a 40 percent drop in Foreign Direct Assistance and a 46 percent decline in private debt and portfolio equity flows. World Bank, *Migration and Remittances Factbook*, 2nd ed. (Washington DC: International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 2011).

¹¹¹ Economists define “financial deepening” as the ratio of money supply to GDP. See Hunte, “Workers’ Remittances;” Ramkishan S. Rajan, “Home-Grown Foreign Aid: Workers’ Remittances as a Form of Development Finance,” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 8, no. 1 (2007): 43–49; and David Andrew Singer, “Migrant Remittances and Exchange Rate Regimes in the Developing World,” *The American Political Science Review* 104, no. 2 (2010): 307–23.

of structural inequality, particularly as underemployment grows in rich countries.¹¹² While reliance on transnational income has been shown to reduce poverty in Africa, it also reinforces pre-existing inequalities.¹¹³ Furthermore, initiatives promoting “globalization from below” through the diaspora—officially identified by the African Union as a “sixth region”—are widely regarded among Africans as a vehicle for building political influence.¹¹⁴

The power effects of remittance markets raise a classic problem in the study of African trade relations. Does the transnational flow of migrant earnings reflect an ethos of wealth redistribution or a form of capital investment? In his classic study of the Tiv in Nigeria, Paul Bohannan describes a traditional system in which parties enjoying relationships of “permanence and warmth” observe hierarchical rules for the circulation of gifts.¹¹⁵ While conveyances within each “sphere of exchange” are morally neutral, morally charged conversions are also possible

¹¹² Clair Mercer et al., “Unsettling Connections: Transnational Networks, Development and African Home Associations,” *Global Networks* 9, no. 2 (2009): 141–61; Roger Waldinger, “Between ‘Here’ and ‘There’: Immigrant Cross-Border Activities and Loyalties,” *International Migration Review* 42, no. 1 (2008): 3–29; Ralph Chami et al., “Are Immigrant Remittance Flows a Source of Capital for Development?” *IMF Staff Papers* 52, no. 1 (2005): 55–81.

¹¹³ Christian Ebeke and Maelan Le Goff, “Why Migrants’ Remittances Reduce Income Inequality in Some Countries and Not in Others?” (Working Paper 19, Centre d’Etudes et de Recherches sur le Développement International [CERDI], Université d’Auvergne Clermont, 2009); and John C. Anyanwu, “International Remittances and Income Inequality in Africa,” *Review of Economic and Business Studies* 4, no. 1 (2011): 117–48.

¹¹⁴ In 2007, the World Bank launched an African Diaspora Program to “strengthen policy, financial, and human capital development in Africa through a portfolio of activities and support in partnership with the African Union, partner countries, partner donors, African Diaspora Professional Networks and Hometown Associations.” Sonia Plaza and Dilip Ratha, eds., *Diaspora for Development in Africa* (Washington, DC: International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 2011). Also see Giles Mohan and A.B. Zack-Williams, “Globalisation from Below: Conceptualising the Role of the African Diasporas in Africa’s Development,” *Review of African Political Economy* 29, no. 92 (2002): 211–36; Rubin Patterson, “Transnationalism: Diaspora-Homeland Development,” *Social Forces* 84, no. 4 (2006): 1891–1907; and Beth Elise Whitaker, “The Politics of Home: Dual Citizenship and the African Diaspora,” *International Migration Review* 45, no. 4 (2011): 755–83.

¹¹⁵ According to Bohannan’s schema, exchangeable goods fall into three incommensurable spheres: locally produced food and other everyday items; cattle, slaves, brass rods, and cloth used for currency; and rights in people other than slaves, primarily women and dependent children. See Paul Bohannan, “Some Principles of Exchange and Investment among the Tiv,” *American Anthropologist* 57, no. 1 (1955): 60–70.

across the threshold from a lower to a higher sphere. These asymmetrical transactions allow for accumulation: a skilled man can exercise power by trading value from chickens to a cow to a wife, generating material and symbolic wealth that attests to his “good heart” for prudent decision-making and “good luck” in the market. Bohannan’s model inverts the logic of capitalism, according to which the restricted exchange is the exception to the rule. Rather than subsuming the use-value of a commodity to an equivalent quantity, spheres of exchange limit exchange-value according to a cultural logic of quality. Hierarchically-ordered chains of equivalence prevent self-aggrandizing behavior from threatening social substance. Although the Tiv trader has violated a normative standard, “everybody’s market is good,” Bohannan is quick to point out that spheres of exchange no longer work as they should. Like Marcel Mauss, he laments the corruption of a gift economy by the calculus of commodification as the rules governing conversions are undermined by the encroachments of colonial law, monetization, and manufactured goods.¹¹⁶ Thus, his account dramatizes the disembedding of economic activity from spheres of exchange organized by kinship ties.

Critics of Bohannan’s model pointed out, however, that an historical distinction between commodity and gift merely displaces the opposition between commensurable exchange and socially-embedded power relations. Firstly, formalists, who universalize utility-maximizing behavior, interpreted both conveyances and convergences as forms of individual choice.

¹¹⁶ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (New York: Norton, 1925). I discuss the anthropology of gift and commodity at length in Chapter 1. The greatest concern voiced to Bohannan was the ease with which subsistence goods could be sold for cash on commodity markets, which could then be used for self-aggrandizement, undermining the local food supply and driving up the cost of women. With the abolition of exchange marriage, courtship became monetized in the form of bridewealth. “Tiv deplore the fact that they are required to ‘sell’ (*te*) their daughters and ‘buy’ (*yam*, but more euphemistically *kern*, to accumulate) wives. It smacks, they tell the investigator in low tones, of slavery. There is no dignity in it since the possibility of converting a bridewealth marriage into an exchange marriage has been removed.” Bohannan, “Some Principles of Exchange,” 69.

Secondly, Marxists, who universalize relations of production, objected that Bohannan's model overlooked the gendered division of labor and the politics of conversion among high-ranking men.¹¹⁷ Relations of exchange and hierarchy were mutually constituted, they argued: dominated women were excluded in through work while equally-situated men were included out through competition. Thirdly, postmodern critics of Bohannan's modernization story rejected the assumption that the universal expansion of monetary exchange would eliminate the logic of the gift. On the contrary, global capitalism had given rise to hybrid forms reflecting historical and cultural particularities. Arjun Appadurai, for example, treats both commodity and gift as variable moments in "the social life of things."¹¹⁸ For Marc Bloch and Jonathan Parry, they are parallel transactional orders according to which short-term acquisitive behaviors ensure the material conditions for long-term social reproduction.¹¹⁹

Whatever the explanatory power of Bohannan's model, the discrepancy between lived and desired social relations, which he and his informants found so troubling, may be the effect of his own analytical standpoint. Construing anxieties about the present as evidence of a formerly

¹¹⁷ Charles Piot adapts Bohannan's model to consider how different registers of exchange transform objects into relations among persons among Kabre in Togo. Charles D. Piot, "Of Persons and Things: Some Reflections on African Spheres of Exchange," *Man* 26, no. 3 (1991): 405–24. He draws here on an extensive literature in anthropology that counterposes African "wealth in people" against Marx's observation that under capitalism, relations among people acquire the form of relations among things. See Claude Meillassoux, *Maidens, Meal and Money: Capitalism and the Domestic Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975); Maurice Godelier, *Perspectives in Marxist Anthropology*, trans. Robert Brain (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); and Chris Gregory, *Gifts and Commodities* (New York: Academic Press, 1982).

¹¹⁸ Marc Bloch and Jonathan Parry, "Money and the Morality of Exchange," in *Money and the Morality of Exchange*, ed. J. Parry and M. Bloch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 1–32.

¹¹⁹ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 27–47. Appadurai inverts the relation between culture and economy yet again in his treatment of globalization, which produces an infinitely substitutable array of cultural differences masking disjunctures between systems of circulation. Along the same lines, Viviana Zelizer has shown how money can be priceless even in the most commodified societies. *The Purchase of Intimacy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

coherent past, the anthropologist idealized “traditional society” as a bounded object of inquiry.¹²⁰ This problem is intrinsic to the disciplinary convention of studying communities in isolation so that negotiated practices appear as structural features within a frame rather than as moments in the ebb and flow of a changing system.¹²¹ As Jane Guyer points out, commodity trading was widespread in Africa even before colonial administrations introduced formal financial institutions to centralize the money supply. “Over centuries,” Guyer argues, “the most valuable of African assets have been invasively and inventively monetized for profit—gained in many ways, under changing conditions. The boundaries at which gains could be made shifted, and with them shifted the forms of recognition they received, as being legitimate or illegal, culturally recognized or concealed.”¹²² Within expansive regional trading networks, ideological barriers to conversion facilitated asymmetrical exchanges across value registers maintained through seigniorage and local monopoly control. Within such a system, marginal gains were achieved through arbitrage that normalized the disorder of shifting concepts, practices, and expectations. The monetization of marriage, for example, was nothing new, though its scale, scope, and particular features have varied under changing conditions. An object or relation, commodity or gift, may differ in value between giver and receiver, buyer and seller, according to their relative power and need.

¹²⁰ Bohannan acknowledged this observer’s effect: “The systematization may be, as in this case, the work of the ethnographer.” Bohannan (1955) *op cit*, pp. 61-2, 70.

¹²¹ Some anthropologists working in the structural-functionalist tradition attempted to capture change as a structural feature of social life. However, these dynamics remained endogenous to the model. See Max Gluckman, *Order and Rebellion in Tribal Africa* (London: Cohen and West, 1963); and Victor Turner, *Schism and Continuity in an African Society: A Study of Ndembu Village Life*, (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1972). For a critique of the bounded community as a methodological convention, see Joanne Passaro, “You Can’t Take the Subway to the Field! ‘Village’ Epistemologies in the Global Village,” in *Anthropological Locations*, ed. A. Gupta and J. Ferguson (Berkeley: University of California Press: 1997), 147–62.

¹²² Jane Guyer, *Marginal Gains: Monetary Transactions in Atlantic Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 17, 27–31.

An anthropological description of an exchange relation, such as the transfer of remittances, is poised between the network of participation and the hierarchy of observation, which draws a sphere around the cultural object. It is not enough to place local economies within a broader spatiotemporal context. The observer must still account for her position, which is both a boundary that demarcates a field of analysis and a bridge that registers heterogeneous movement, a screen of narcissistic projection and a form of connection.¹²³ Observed from this threshold, the antinomy between power and exchange, economics and politics, disappears within a relational infrastructure that is both informal and inflected by the state.¹²⁴ Remittances are a critical feature of postcolonial African economies that remain “marketable but not bankable,” generating wealth, power, and an imaginary of gain without realizing international expectations of development.¹²⁵ Boundaries demarcating institutions, such as the market and the state, have performative efficacy in themselves. Social life is permeated by the negotiation, recognition, and justification of these thresholds through participation that presupposes complexity-building connections and observation that posits complexity-reducing representations.

During my fieldwork I observed how my informants crossed thresholds within and between the United States and Africa, diversifying strategies to generate and circulate capital,

¹²³ Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson make this point: “Border as method involves negotiating the boundaries between the different kinds of knowledge that come to bear on the border and, in so doing, aims to throw light on the subjectivities that come into being through such conflicts.” Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 17–18.

¹²⁴ Julia Elyachar recounts one such moment of collapse and exposure in “Upending Infrastructure: Tamarod, Resistance, and Agency after the January 25th Revolution in Egypt,” *History and Anthropology* 25, no. 4 (2014): 452–71.

¹²⁵ Ethnographers have documented how the expansion of unregulated trade networks represents new opportunities for state rent-seeking and political control. See Janet Roitman, *Fiscal Disobedience: An Anthropology of Economic Regulation in Central Africa* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); G. Blundo and J.P. Olivier de Sardan, *Everyday Corruption and the State: Citizens and Public officials in Africa* (New York: Zed Press, 2006); and Brenda Chalfin, *Neoliberal Frontiers: An Ethnography of Sovereignty in West Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

not only for the sake of consumption but also to invest in current and future projects. At the festivals, Amina was teaching Momar tricks of the trade that she had learned from her mother's Malinke relatives. Economic survival required a speculative attitude that hedged risk, accepted loss, and maintained long-term relationships at an amiable remove—close enough to provide support on short notice, yet formal enough to prevent emotional interference.¹²⁶ The management of social intimacy regulates expectations and the distribution of resources, particularly during times of scarcity. Amina was saddened but not surprised when cordial acquaintances became competitive, even antagonistic, in the years following the recession. Her response was to attend more closely to her inner circle of contacts while exploring new strategies for making do.

In 2012, I had accompanied Amina home to Dakar for an open-ended December holiday that extended well into the spring. Amina traveled with three large suitcases full of merchandise, one checked in under my name at the airport in order to avoid additional fees. Those suitcases—packed with clothes, shoes, handbags, costume jewelry, and perfumed body spray—would become the centerpiece of our travels. Early one afternoon, Amina's mother, Mama Niang, brought us on a sales call to a government office in downtown Dakar. The art-deco high-rise was dilapidated, its stucco yellowing and water-stained. Having just won the presidential election a few months ago, Macky Sal's opposition party was faced with pulling together an administration from the ruins of his predecessor's decimated budget. Only a core of civil servants remained, though their orders were suspended in the hope that as long as they held onto their offices, they wouldn't get fired. Thus, it was not clear who had authorization to be there, a threshold situation

¹²⁶ It is interesting that Gerald Davis describes the networked social formations of the U.S. business community in similar terms. "The blueprint for the American system of corporate governance revolves around arms-length relationships that prevent personal ties from influencing the operations of the various markets that comprise the system. Yet inevitably, social ties are widespread and influential." Davis, *Managed by the Markets*, 97.

creating opportunities for gain. This may explain why the courtyard was swarming with visitors: men in suits and women in headscarves, meeting someone or selling something.

To enter we had to pass through what appeared to be a metal security gate but was actually plywood painted grey. A uniformed officer sat at a folding table on the other side, checking documents. Behind him a door led into a small concrete bunker, cluttered with couches and easy chairs, and full of people who appeared to be waiting for something. It was obvious that we weren't going to get two suitcases full of merchandise into the building. Mama Niang, who had worked in this building for years, struck up a conversation with one of the security guards while we retreated beneath a Neem tree across the street. Amina swept handfuls of jewelry and perfume into her cavernous shoulder bag and then, leaving our companion with the remaining supplies, we slipped unnoticed through the gate and into the crowded courtyard.

The lobby was lofty and slightly fetid. Mama Niang charged forward with purpose, as though she were still a civil servant, down a long hall lined with closed wooden doors. Everyone we passed by seemed to know her; some had expected the visit. At length, we were ushered into the air-conditioned ante-office of the minister of education by a slender, impeccably dressed woman in her thirties. Amina arranged her hastily chosen wares on the coffee table and sat regally behind them while Amina's mother scouted out a clientele, sending secretaries and clerks in to visit.

Suddenly, a man in a blue suit and tie stepped in. "So what's going on here?" he asked sternly. "Is this an office or a marketplace?" Then he broke into a smile. Everyone laughed and then dutifully, if sluggishly, returned to work. Amina carefully returned her wares to her bag, apologizing, but left a few necklaces on the desk to keep her clients' attention. The man admonished his secretary for eating at her desk, two of the other women lingered at the door, and

a third grabbed a scheduling calendar and sat on the couch beside Amina. Their attention remained on the few remaining items on the table, and when the man went into his office, Amina took her things out again and the long, gossip-embellished negotiation continued. They told us that the government employees had not been paid since the election and had no money to spend. Dropping into other offices to greet old friends, Mama Niang managed to sell four pairs of sunglasses and a sequin-encrusted bracelet for a total of \$60. Two women followed us down to the street, where they fondled rings and watches lovingly but without conviction. Amina sent them each back to work with a bottle of peach body spray on credit.

It was a lot of work for very few sales, but Amina was not easily discouraged. These women remained potential clients, as were their family members in New York, Atlanta, Florida, and Tennessee. A few months later, we would travel over rutted roads to Bamako, Mali, where we visited family and purchased top-quality *baizanes*, fine cotton cloth for dyeing by expert artisans in the sprawling *quartiers* surrounding the city center. Amina then worked with tailors in Dakar to shape some of these textiles into *bubus* of her own design, others made to order for friends in the United States where they reliably sold at a 200 percent markup. Back in the United States, I accompanied Amina on visits to the parties and homes of these women, who received their purchases of garments and lengths of cloth as though they were precious gifts.¹²⁷

Amina's relationships did not always come through. When a long-awaited shipping container from China did not arrive in Dakar as planned, she discovered that her business partner

¹²⁷ Beth Buggenhagen has written at length on the significance of cloth exchange to affirm the power of networks among Senegalese women. See Beth Buggenhagen, "Are Births Just 'Women's Business'? Gift Exchange, Value, and Global Volatility in Muslim Senegal," *American Ethnologist* 38, no. 4 (2011): 714–32.

had spent the money on more pressing commitments, leaving three investors in the lurch.¹²⁸ In the meantime, Amina had rented a retail space in Dakar and set up shop with the cumulative contents of our suitcases, only to find during our return visit that family had skimmed both merchandise and profits in order to meet their own immediate needs. “I set up the shop for them,” Amina complained in a rare moment of exasperation, “but they wouldn’t even wait until we got established before they started helping themselves.” Unable to stay in Dakar to keep an eye on business and too broke to find another way of delivering the goods, she decided to sell the merchandise to another vendor. It was an expensive mistake, and she had to take out a high-interest commercial loan in order to pay back the *ésusu*.¹²⁹ Yet she remained close to the people who had let her down. When I asked her why, she told me that she made it a point not to hold a grudge. “It is what it is. You can’t let these things get to you. People do what they have to do.”

Amina was making markets by converting value across borders. When opportunities to perform wage labor disappear, distinctions dissolve between work and home, public and private. Commodities become gifts and gifts become commodities through exchange relations governed by unstable terms of payment and the long-term deferral of obligations. Outstanding debts operate as wagers on a common future—while earning a living, handling a court case, negotiating bureaucracies, participating in families and organizations—by managing expectations with respect to particular outcomes. Risk-bearing implies risk-taking as a form of

¹²⁸ China has become a popular destination for African traders. See Mahir Şaul and Michaela Pelican, “Global African Entrepreneurs: A New Research Perspective on Contemporary African Migration.” *Urban Anthropology* 43, nos. 1-3 (2014): 1–16; and Min Zhou et al., “Entrepreneurship and Interracial Dynamics: A Case Study of Self-Employed Africans and Chinese in Guangzhou, China,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39, no. 9 (2016): 1566–86.

¹²⁹ An *ésusu* is a rotating credit association. See Chapter 1 (fn 54) and Chapter 4, (fn 123).

life, the conversion of uncertainty into objective forms of hazard and debt.¹³⁰ Wherever jobs are scarce and self-employment is the norm, the willingness to gamble one's future on uncertain strategies for marginal gain—and the ability to inspire confidence in that leap of faith—creates value in a virtual mode, as the capacity to sustain a viable community. Whether forced or the result of anticipation and planning, migration creates “a zone of indeterminacy in which one must confront the hazards involved in translating desires into projects worth pursuing.”¹³¹ It is a creative response to circumstances that disrupt and reanimate ways of being together, keeping things open by making connections as insurance against the unknown.

By April 2016, having sold her remaining merchandise and her hair-braiding shop in Chicago, Amina was no longer in business. She had decided not to wait for a “wealth effect” recovery as asset prices rose in capital markets and cash trickled into the service economy.¹³² She had finished her bachelor's degree and moved back to New York where she was working full-time as a caseworker for a child welfare agency. Then she decided to start a master's degree in

¹³⁰ In a 1921 treatise on the fundamentals of economic theory, Frank Knight distinguishes between uncertainty—unknown events that we do not even know how to describe—and risk—possible outcomes that are predicted and assessed. While the former exceeds our epistemological grasp, the latter is fodder for the mathematical tools of probability. Knight's attempt to overhaul “the mechanical categories of economic analysis” coincided with the disruptions to theoretical physics posed by the ontological status of uncertainty in quantum mechanics. Frank H. Knight, *Risk, Uncertainty and Profit* (New York: Augustus M. Kelly, 1964). Anthropologist Caitlin Zaloom describes risk-taking as a form of action in which financial commodity traders exploit uncertainty to produce profitable selves. Caitlin Zaloom, “The Productive Life of Risk,” *Cultural Anthropology* 19, no. 3 (2004): 365–91.

¹³¹ Julie Y Chu, *Cosmologies of Credit: Transnational Mobility and the Politics of Destination in China* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 4.

¹³² Capital distribution under financialization is explained by some economists as a “wealth effect,” according to which people spend more as the value of their assets rise. According to this theory, recovery after the 2008 Recession was the effect of growing confidence in the value of homes and investment portfolios, which caused wealth to “trickle down” to businesses selling goods and services throughout the global economy. See Mariacristina De Nardi, et al., “Consumption and the Great Recession;” and Bruce D. Meyer and James X. Sullivan, “Consumption and Income Inequality and the Great Recession,” *American Economic Review* 103, no. 3 (2013): 178–83; and Fabio C. Bagliano and Claudio Morana, “The Great Recession: US Dynamics and Spillovers to the World Economy,” *Journal of Banking and Finance* 36 (2012): 1–13.

social work and was as exhausted as ever. “The money’s never easy,” she joked, “no matter how you make it!”

We were walking through the wholesale district in midtown Manhattan where she used to buy her merchandise. Even though she was out of the game, she couldn’t help but survey the field as we walked. “Times have changed,” she remarked, as we passed window displays packed with inventory, each shop specializing to a particular market niche. There were t-shirts and basketball caps, hookahs, jewelry, beauty supplies, but mostly fabric and clothing. “It’s a bigger business now. The little guys can’t compete. A friend of mine used to have a shop over there, but the rents got too high so he moved his entire inventory into his house in Queens. Now he does it all online.” We visited a beauty shop featuring mostly French skin products—whitening creams and exfoliating soaps. Amina asked for a particular brand, which they didn’t carry. “It’s like the lottery,” she told me. “You make your investments and sometimes you hit it big, and sometimes you lose it all.” She had that look in her eye that I’d seen before. “You’re not going to be able to give it up, are you?” I teased her, and she laughed. “When I’m done with school. Maybe if I get a part-time job, I can do some business on the side. We’ll see.”

Near the end of the block, a dozen or so Chinese and South Asian men stood at the curb with piles of boxes, waiting for the Fed Ex truck to deliver orders to shops all over the country. We crossed the street and turned down Broadway, where dozens of African men were standing around, biding their time. “These warehouses are full of businesses without storefronts,” Amina explained. “They pay these men on commission to find customers and bring them up.” Walking up to an older man in a polo shirt, she asked in French for a certain vendor. “I know him. Let me call him for you.” He handed her his phone, and while she was talking, I listened to him bragging to two younger men. “I know a man who just left for Senegal. Before that he was in China and

Burkina Faso. He's the richest man in his village, and he has built it all up just by selling clothes for children."

Amina handed him the phone. "Come on. Let's go." Once we'd crossed the street, she told me that they said they were from Senegal but didn't speak Wolof. "These salesmen can be from wherever you want them to be!" The man in the polo shirt came after us but she waved him off. She knew what she was looking for and how to find it. We crossed the street and wandered through alleys with open storefronts like an open-air market. She asked around and discovered that the people she used to know had all gone elsewhere, though it had been just a few years since she had been here last. Everywhere we went, we were watched by men hovering in front of their businesses or posted on corners and prowling the sidewalks with earbuds dangling and cellphones in hand. "With you here, they probably think we're cops," she said.

At the corner of Thirtieth and Broadway a man walked up to us and said, "I work here. What are you looking for?" Amina told him that she wanted some Ralph Lauren polo shirts for a friend of hers in Chicago. "How many pieces do you want?" The conversation slipped from English, to French, to Wolof as they gauged each other's suitability for a safe and simple exchange. He glanced at me repeatedly, and finally asked if I was an American. "Yes, she's American," Amina replied, without elaborating. Eventually he led us to another man who took Amina's order and disappeared. While we were waiting, we stepped into a tiny shop with dresses hanging from the ceilings, covering every inch of the walls. When I lifted my phone to take a picture, the Sikh proprietor sprang towards me, waving his arms. "No photos, please! No photos!" He explained that his designs were patented, and he couldn't be too careful. The vendors had licenses from the manufacturers abroad to sell certain designs, and they were constantly having to protect their inventory from predatory competitors who would copy their

best-selling items, have them made locally, and then sell them under the table. Amina pointed at a tub of African shea butter on the counter. “I like that product,” she said, “but I don’t like how they put coloring in it.” No, no, he insisted. This was the natural color, a golden brown unique to Ghana. In fact, all of his merchandise came from Ghana, though they looked just like the Indian sundresses we had seen in the other shops.

Amina bought the shea butter, and we stepped back into the street. The original dealer of Amina’s polo shirts had been discreetly tracking our movements lest we change our mind and leave before the transaction was completed. “It doesn’t look like they’re doing much, does it?” she murmured as he approached us. “Well, it really wears you out not knowing where your next dollar’s coming from.” While they bantered in Wolof, I observed the traders as they did their work. Most of them were well-dressed, and when they weren’t texting or talking into their phones they were socializing with their colleagues. It reminded me of the networking among men on the street in West Africa, the public activity of exaggerated agreement and hot disputes, lengthy polemics, and an undercurrent of competition that might flare up at any time.¹³³ A middle-aged man lectured three teenagers on the promotion of New York artists overseas; an androgynous dancer with bleached hair in a flowered satin vest was showing off his moves to his trendsetting companions; an older man in a three-piece suit holding a briefcase was checking his wristwatch impatiently. I caught fragments of conversation about money: how to make it, how to keep it, how to spend it. When I lifted my phone for a picture, all their heads turned towards me. I put my phone away.

¹³³ See Michael Ralph, “Killing Time,” *Social Text* 97, no. 4 (2008): 1–29; and Sasha Newell, *The Modernity Bluff: Crime, Consumption, and Citizenship in Côte d’Ivoire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

Most of this activity was illegal. “General merchandise vendors” are prohibited from operating in the public spaces of midtown Manhattan.¹³⁴ Immigrants with work authorization could obtain a license to set up a table in other parts of the city, but the cost was prohibitive and the pirated designer goods that sold best would be confiscated. With or without authorization, this was one of the best places in the U.S. for trading in retail commodities. There were two reasons for this: first, retailers came from all over the country seeking large quantities of merchandise; and second, this portion of the wholesale district was not under the jurisdiction of a Business Improvement District (BID), the property-owners’ associations that demand the enforcement of zoning regulations.¹³⁵ If the law is written to be blind, it is also empty, taking the context of its application as its content. Enforcement is usually accommodating when there is money to be made. The dealer told Amina there had been a crackdown lately, which suggested that the fickle market had shifted. Stepped up immigration enforcement also had everyone on edge. These days they were always dodging the police, which was why they had to keep their inventory in cars and apartments off-site.

The supplier of the polo shirts returned about twenty minutes later, gave Amina a black bag, and directed us to the first beauty supply shop we had visited. There, yet another man was sitting on a stool with two others to take our payment. Amina surmised from his accent in French that he was from Côte d’Ivoire. When she attempted to take the shirts out of the bag to inspect

¹³⁴ Food trucks, veterans, and “First Amendment vendors” selling books, photographs and artwork can be licensed to operate throughout New York City. However, opportunities to make a living on the street has less to do with formal zoning regulations than the variegated block-by-block management of space. “The geography of street vending in New York is produced and negotiated through practices of intimidation, harassment, avoidance and evasion employed by various actors including enforcement agents, store and building managers and vendors themselves.” Thomas Devlin, “An Area that Governs Itself: Informality, Uncertainty and the Management of Street Vending in New York City,” *Planning Theory* 10, no. 1 (2011): 56.

¹³⁵ Devlin, 60.

their quality, he scolded her: “No, madam. We do *not* do that here.” When she took out her wallet, he stood up suddenly and stepped out as though on more urgent business. Shaking her head in disbelief, Amina followed and slipped the payment into his hand in passing, like a drug deal.

The Value of Price

Is a migrant’s survival in the financial economy a matter of value, strategy, or luck? Jean-Claude firmly believed in the value of his hard work and determination, while Amina reacted to hardship by diversifying her strategies for getting ahead. Stéphane, on the other hand, told his story as a series of lucky accidents. I met him in 2015 at a dinner party hosted by my friends Rebecca and Claude, who was from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). They had met in a French reading group, and he was clearly an intellectual. The four of us talked about art and politics until dessert, when Claude suggested that Stéphane tell me his story. His guest graciously complied.

“I was just an aimless kid until I got his first radio.” His parents had brought it to him from Abidjan, where they both worked as civil servants. He was living with his grandparents in their village. “My father’s father was a Baoulé chief. My mother’s father was a shaman. I remember that he used to make rain. But I was interested in another kind of magic.” Stéphane told me that he was restless and volatile until he decided to take that radio apart to see how it worked. “Then it stopped working. I was so upset that I didn’t have any money to get it fixed! I didn’t want to live without my radio, so I figured out how to do it myself.” At the impressionable age of ten, Stéphane was hooked on electronics. His love affair with communications technology

earned him a scholarship to the *Université de Cocody-Abidjan* and then a highly competitive post in Burkina-Faso.

The day he arrived in Ougadougou, he took out his camera in front of some soldiers and was detained for four hours. When they finally let him go, he went to the hotel, dropped off his bags, and set out to explore the city.” It was the first time I’d been out of Ivory Coast, you see. So I came to this blockade in the middle of the street, and I was thinking it was just for cars so I made my way around the concrete barrier, and the next thing I knew I was looking down the barrels of three Kalashnikovs! The soldier made me get down on my knees. Just at that moment, the commander came out of the shed and asked to see my papers. ‘Don’t you know about the curfew?’ he asked me. There had just been a *coup d’etat*, and the soldiers were ordered to shoot violators on sight. ‘You’re lucky to be alive, do you know that?’ he said to me, and that’s what I’ve thought ever since.”

Although Stéphane had been hired under the administration of assassinated president Thomas Sankara, he was permitted to keep his position. “They wanted me to develop a secure government intranet, and they wouldn’t take no for an answer!” He soon found that outdated computer equipment and the sporadic electrical supply made it nearly impossible to maintain a reliable server. He became interested in politics but kept his opinions to himself, writing in a journal that he hid in his mattress. One day he impulsively replied to an editorial in a French technical magazine that had deeply impressed him. “It was written by a professor in Paris who predicted that the internet would change everything. I told him that I wanted to be part of that transformation. I wanted to be sure that Africa was not left behind.” The author was delighted by the letter and invited Stéphane to visit. “That meeting in Paris changed my life,” Stéphane said

wistfully. “He told me that I was the vanguard of Africa’s technological future, but first I had to go to the United States. ‘There is no limit to what you can learn there,’ he said.”

In 1992 Stéphane came to Chicago on a student visa. First he studied English at a community college, and then he earned a BA in computer programming at a local university. His professional credentials were not recognized in the United States, but he didn’t mind having to repeat college. “I met people from all over the world there!” he recalled. “I already knew my major inside and out, so I had time to read literature and talk with people from India, Russia, El Salvador, Japan.” He was still close friends with the woman who had hosted him during that time. He told me that the first time he left her house, a patrol car came up to him and asked for his identification. He gave them her address, and they waved him on skeptically. Later her host was horrified. “I thought they were just doing their job,” he said. “But she explained that for a long time her street had been the dividing line between the white Italian neighborhood to the north and the African Americans to the south.

Stéphane’s parents encouraged him to find work in the United States, and he soon landed a lucrative IT position at a major insurance company, where he stayed for twelve stable but stressful years. His colleagues complained about long hours and inadequate wages, but he was making more money than he ever thought possible. He had little free time to socialize, but he was proud to take responsibility for supporting his parents’ retirement and found that he was still earning far more than he could spend. With the encouragement of African friends, he became obsessed with the stock market and bought real estate in Abidjan as a long-term investment. When he decided to move into his own apartment, the owner of a vintage three-flat in Lincoln Park didn’t believe his salary. “Call my boss if you don’t believe me,” Stéphane replied calmly. When his African American supervisor identified her employee, the owner muttered into the

phone,” I guess *anyone* can make it in America today.” She was furious, and urged Stéphane to boycott that building. But the fact was that he didn’t really take it as seriously as some people did. There were always people who made life difficult, but you couldn’t let them ruin your day. “The French are extremely racist towards Africans,” he told me. “But they are fascinated by African Americans. Here it’s the other way around. White people are suspicious of African Americans, but when they see Africans, they are usually curious and friendly.”

He always planned on moving back to Abidjan until the civil war in 2002. “It broke my heart,” he said bitterly. Abidjan was shattered in ways that would not be healed in his lifetime. “There’s no more green space after all the people came into the city. But the worst thing is how suspicious people are of each other.” Stéphane blamed international financial institutions, a corrupt oligarchy, and a neocolonial relationship with France for his country’s troubles. “The popularly-elected socialist president was ousted by the corporate interests,” he said. “It’s actually as simple as that. Côte d’Ivoire is the world’s biggest producer of cocoa. There’s power in that. But not our power.” Having many informants who had been terrorized by that popularly-elected president, Laurent Gbagbo, I was uncomfortable with Stéphane’s remarks. At the time, Gbagbo was in the custody of the International Criminal Court for promoting violence against the Muslim minority. It was also the case, however, that the current President Alassane Ouattara had been an official at the IMF and was well-regarded in the international community. My expression must have given me away.

“Listen,” Stéphane said, leaning towards me. “I talk to people sometimes who say they know Côte d’Ivoire. They say, ‘Oh, the people from the south always discriminate against the people from the north,’ and I tell them they don’t know what they’re talking about. Religion never mattered. Ethnicity never mattered when I was growing up.” Stéphane’s siblings and

parents were all in Abidjan, and he was glad that they were involved in each other's lives. He talked to them on the phone, but he hadn't been back in twenty years. "I can't stand to go home anymore and see what they've done to my country." He described a radio show he attended, during which two people he knew from Chicago's *Ivoirien* community had a debate about the conflict. Afterwards they each greeted the moderator but would not look at each other. This upset Stéphane so much that he went up to them and insisted that they shake hands. "I won't shake hands with a dog such as him," one snarled. "He doesn't deserve to be in the same room as me, even if he *did* marry my sister." Stéphane found this intractable anger a tragic betrayal of the open, optimistic, dynamic country of his youth.

"Does the conflict ever come up in your personal life?" I asked him boldly, but he deflected my intrusion with more politics. "People don't understand why they're so poor in such a rich country, so they blame each other." He thought that the same thing was happening in the United States today. "Nobody was safe from the recession. I tell my family that Chicago used to be the land of opportunity, but not anymore. A lot of people here have run out of luck."

In 2010, Stéphane's entire department was transferred overseas, and he lost his job. It was not a sudden decision. In fact, he had played a central role in reorganizing the company's information systems. "For two years I was working overtime to make myself irrelevant. I would be walking around with a blackberry and two pagers, on call all night, just waiting to respond to a problem in the system. Then they transferred part of my responsibility to the company's division in London. They'd contact the guy on call at four o'clock in the afternoon and he'd tell them to wait until morning." He smirked, shaking his head. "Who's going to work the way we do in America? Not even Americans, which is why most of us came from other countries. In a way, I feel as though I lost those years. But at the time I was feeling important. I didn't realize that I

wasn't living at all." It took Stéphane a year to get another job with a consultancy firm, but he hated it. "You have to bill an hour for every conversation, no matter how short. You charge for every email exchange with a client. I felt like I was robbing them! I argued about it with the people in charge, but they said that's just the way it's got to be." He didn't last the year.

"What are you doing now?" I asked, and he shrugged his shoulders. "I've spent too much of my life running around like an insect." He was living frugally, counting pennies and enjoying his time. "I've always invested in Africa," he explained. "For some reason I didn't lose as much money as other people I know. It might all disappear tomorrow, who knows? Meanwhile, I spend time with my friends and I wait for the right thing to come along." He was taking classes at the Art Institute of Chicago. "All I really want to do is paint."

Both Jean-Paul and Stephán were members of Africa's "brain drain," highly-skilled professionals who sought opportunities abroad. Like so many of my informants, however, Jean-Paul immediately slipped into "brain waste": an overqualified and underpaid migrant worker sacrificing his career—at least in the short term—to support his family back home.¹³⁶ Their divergent situations may be explained in terms of family background, professional achievement

¹³⁶ Globalization has influenced attitudes among scholars and policymakers towards the emigration of highly-skilled professionals from poor countries. The term "brain drain" was introduced by the British Royal Society to describe the emigration of skilled professionals from England to the United States and Canada after the Second World War. During the Cold War, the "brain gain" of wealthy economies was considered an obstacle to development by both "third world" leaders and "first world" experts. See Saleem M.M. Qureshi, "Brain Drain from the Developing Countries," *Pakistan Horizon* 18, no. 2 (1965): 164–70; and James A. Perkins, "Foreign Aid and the Brain Drain," *Foreign Affairs* 44, no. 4 (1966): 608–19. Fifty years later, more neutral terms such as "human capital flight" emphasize the "win-win" benefits of skilled migration, such as remittance income, knowledge transfer, and democratization due to the political influence of the diaspora. See Hein de Haas, "International Migration, Remittances and Development: Myths and Facts," *Third World Quarterly* 26, no. 8 (2005): 1243–58; Nathalie Baptiste, "Brain Drain and the Politics of Immigration," *Foreign Policy in Focus* February 25, 2014. Studies emphasizing the value of skills transfer rarely address the "brain waste" of migrants who are unable leverage their training. For a thorough and balanced review, see Frédéric Docquier and Hillel Rapoport, "Globalization, Brain Drain, and Development," *Journal of Economic Literature* 50, no. 3 (2012): 681–31.

in Africa, the availability of support from personal networks, and their respective migration pathways. Under the precarious conditions of financialized work, however, what mattered most was the translation of these contextual factors into capital.

The word “capital” has had a contentious history with respect to human value. Referring to “heads” of cattle in ancient Rome, it was used as early as the thirteenth century to describe the assets of Italian trading firms.¹³⁷ It was no accident that the emergence of the concept corresponded with the development of modern banking and double-entry bookkeeping, a technology that equated credit with debt as the balance of zero.¹³⁸ The accounting practices of mercantile capitalism gave rise to a form of capital that was anticipatory in focus: present wealth was the capacity to generate future income.¹³⁹ Fixed capital, such as equipment and inventory, served as collateral for short-term loans in order to maintain cash flow, a form of security against inevitable contingencies. Colonization and the slave trade gave rise to an extensive infrastructure of quasi-public institutions—central banks, stock markets, joint stock companies, and commercial insurance—that promoted the capacity of capital to reproduce itself by facilitating its liquidity. Adam Smith limited his definition of capital to only one of these forms: the aggregate stock—including “the acquired and useful abilities of all the inhabitants or members of a society”—which permits labor to produce “the wealth of nations” from the land.¹⁴⁰ For Smith and his followers, the value of capital was rooted in things themselves. This ontological

¹³⁷ Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 25th to 18th Century: The Structure of Everyday Life*, trans. Siân Reynold (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 232–33.

¹³⁸ See Bruce G. Carruthers and Wendy Nelson Espeland, “Accounting for Rationality: Double-Entry Bookkeeping and the Rhetoric of Economic Rationality,” *American Journal of Sociology* 97, no. 1 (1991): 31–69; Brian Rotman, *Signifying Nothing: The Semiotics of Zero* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987).

¹³⁹ Edwin Cannan, “Early History of the Term Capital,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 36, no. 3 (1921): 469–81. Also see the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

¹⁴⁰ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Wealth of Nations* (New York: Random House, 2000), 306.

commitment reinforced his association of the term “human capital” with slavery, which was carefully distinguished from free laborers and their acquired skills.¹⁴¹

Nevertheless, financial institutions continued to perform their speculative function. While political economists developed theories of society based on accumulated labor, statisticians designed metrics for the monetary assessment of human lives based on the present value of future earnings. These calculations were used not only to determine the exchange value of slaves, but also to estimate national wealth, levy taxes, determine civil liability, and set the terms for commercial loans and insurance contracts.¹⁴² As Marx pointed out, the abolition of slavery and serfdom only intensified human capitalization. What defines capitalism is the capacity of capital to regenerate itself as a form of potential that feeds on past value. Its source is the “doubly-free” worker: survival through wage labor is the corollary of emancipation from bondage. Unable to raise capital through social ties, free workers have nothing to sell but their time. They are subjected to a new form of social domination as creditors, advancing labor that is fully compensated.¹⁴³ In the “hidden abode” of production, the capitalist steals a surplus of this labor-

¹⁴¹ Sir William Petty’s attempt in 1691 to estimate the monetary value of a laborer was the brunt of Jonathan Swift’s (1729) *Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People from Being a Burthen to Their Parents or Country, and For Making Them Beneficial to the Public* (Project Gutenberg, 1729; repr. 2019); B.F. Kiker, “The Historical Roots of the Concept of Human Capital,” *Journal of Political Economy* 74, no. 5 (1966): 482.

¹⁴² D. Knights and T. Vurdubakis, “Calculations of Risk: Towards an Understanding of Insurance as a Moral and Political Technology,” *Accounting Organizations and Society* 18, nos. 7-8 (1993): 729–64. The insurance industry began with maritime policies covering the risks of mercantile trade, especially slaves. See Robin Pearson and David Richardson, “Insuring the Transatlantic Slave Trade,” *Journal of Economic History* 79, no. 2 (2019): 417–46; and Stephen D. Behrendt, “Human Capital in the British Slave Trade,” in *Liverpool and Transatlantic Slavery*, ed. D. Richardson et al. (Liverpool University Press, 2007). Michael Ralph explores the centrality of slave insurance to the development of the U.S. insurance industry in his internet project, *Treasury of Weary Souls*, www.treasuryofwearysouls.com (accessed 9/14/20). His focus is on the expansion of life insurance to secure the financial interests of owners “renting” skilled workers to enterprises that were industrializing the South.

¹⁴³ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. 1*, trans. by Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1976), 278. On the temporal contradiction of capitalism as social domination, see Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

time in the expectation that its value will be realized in the market.¹⁴⁴ “As soon as an exchange occurs,” Marx writes, “the surplus-value is already incorporated in the commodities.”¹⁴⁵ Surplus value is both future capital and past labor; it is an indeterminate referent that is indexed by price.¹⁴⁶ Commodity exchange is the moment in which capital changes from the virtual form of human capital into money, which can be invested in either the expansion of production or interest-bearing stocks and bonds.

However it is invested, capital appears to workers and capitalists alike as the independent capacity of wealth to reproduce itself. Generations of economists have defended this appearance against the political threat of Marx’s theory. At the turn of the twentieth century, a marginalist revolution in economics replaced the classical labor theory of value with a behavioral focus on individual action.¹⁴⁷ Within this neoclassical paradigm, value is reduced to its market price, which is not a function of the objective forces of production but a sign of the subjective desire to maximize utility. In the early 1960s, Gary Becker applied this marginalist conception of utility-maximizing behavior to the problem of income inequality. “Since earnings are gross of the return on human capital,” he argued, “some persons may earn more than others simply because they

¹⁴⁴ Marx, 279–80. “The consumption of labour-power is completed, as in the case of every other commodity, outside the market or the sphere of circulation. Let us therefore, in company with the owner of money and the owner of labour-power, leave this noisy sphere, where everything takes place on the surface and in full view of everyone, and follow them into the hidden abode of production, on whose threshold there hangs the notice ‘No admittance except on business’. Here we shall see, not only how capital produces, but how capital is itself produced. The secret of profit-making must at last be laid bare.”

¹⁴⁵ Marx, *Capital*, 234.

¹⁴⁶ See Slavoj Žižek, “The Parallax View,” *New Left Review* 25 (2004): 121–34; and Kojin Karatani, *Transcritique: On Kant and Marx* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).

¹⁴⁷ Marginalist economic theory explains discrepancies in the value of goods and services according to their desirability at the limit—or margin—of scarcity. See Herbert Hovenkamp, “Regulation and the Marginalist Revolution,” *Florida Law Review* 71 (2019): 455–514. The tension between behaviorism and general theories of society was also central to sociology during this period. Compare George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); Emile Durkheim, *Suicide* (New York: Free Press, 1997); and Max Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*. (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1949).

invest more in themselves.”¹⁴⁸ Many economists found personal responsibility for investment in human resources to be an appealing explanation for uneven development, particularly in contrast to structural approaches such as dependency theory, which attributed persistent poverty to unequal terms of trade and the concentration of wealth.¹⁴⁹ Their methodological individualism, which extrapolated social outcomes from rational interactions, led them to expect that higher level of human capital within a population should create its own demand through “positive externalities” such as higher productivity, lower unemployment, and economic growth.¹⁵⁰ Thus, education was a priority for Africa’s newly decolonized states as well as their international funders.

When those jobs failed to materialize, however, a surplus of “human capital” far exceeded the marginal utility that would provide a return on those investments. For many economists, the failure of neoclassical theory to anticipate the negative externalities of a lagging global economy constitutes a “micro-macro paradox.”¹⁵¹ For the emigrating professional, however, the paradox lies in the failure to realize surplus value. The temporal contradiction that powers the self-valorization of capital for Marx appears in human capital theory as an opposition between “cost-of-production” and “capitalized-earnings” methodologies. “The former method is the less useful,” explained economist B. F. Kiker, “since there is no simple and necessary

¹⁴⁸ Gary Becker, “Investment in Human Capital: A Theoretical Analysis,” *Journal of Political Economy* 70, no. 5 (1962): 48.

¹⁴⁹ See Hans Singer, “The Distribution of Gains between Investing and Borrowing Countries,” *American Economic Review* 40 (1950): 473–85; and Raul Prebisch, “The Economic Development of Latin America and Its Principal Problems,” *Economic Bulletin for Latin America* 7 (1950): 1–12.

¹⁵⁰ Emrullah Tan, “Human Capital Theory: A Holistic Criticism,” *Review of Educational Research* 84, no. 3 (2014): 424–25.

¹⁵¹ Lant Pritchett, “Where Has All the Education Gone?” *The World Bank Economic Review* 15, no. 3 (2001): 367–91.

relationship between the cost of producing an item and its economic value.”¹⁵² In other words, the value added by an education is merely potential. Better, in that case, to assess human capital in terms of labor market demand rather than the cost of supply. Accordingly, Gary Becker describes human capital prospectively: it does not exist unless its value is realized in the labor market. Yet the student invests time and effort into an education under the assumption that a market will exist. The student treats human capital not only as a capacity for future earnings, but also as a form of personal property that already exists as the product of past labor. The idea that personal value is enhanced through education was a widely-shared conviction among my informants, even when professional qualifications delivered no monetary benefits whatsoever. With or without the returns of Becker’s human capital, advanced degrees operated within their networks as social capital.

In the 1980s, as neoclassical economics dominated public policy, Pierre Bourdieu revived Marx’s approach to capital as simultaneously cumulative and speculative, constituting power as well as value. For Bourdieu, capital actively structures the world through social practices that confer the obligations of the gift economy as well as the profits of work. “In contrast to the cynical but also economical transparency of economic exchange, in which equivalents change hands in the same instant, the essential ambiguity of social exchange, which presupposes misrecognition, in other words, a form of faith and of bad faith (in the sense of self-deception), presupposes a much more subtle economy of time.”¹⁵³ By “misrecognition,” Bourdieu is referring to the leap of faith required of any investment, as well as the possible convertibility of disinterested social capital into material gain. His concern is not a categorical distinction between

¹⁵² Kiker, “The Historical Roots,” 497.

¹⁵³ Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. J. Richardson (New York: Greenwood, 1986), 252.

forms of capital, but the trace of the past in the present. Alongside the moment of the transaction, which determines a particular price in time, a hidden abode of social reproduction cultivates value that may never cash out yet is never wasted.

Stéphane was well-positioned to convert his social capital into human capital and vice versa. His talents had been recognized at every stage of his professional development. The most prosperous country in French West Africa, Côte d'Ivoire has been a receiving country for regional migrants since decolonization, and despite a decade of civil war, remains one of the world's leading exporters of cocoa. Notwithstanding growing economic and political instability throughout the 1980s, Stéphane benefitted from his country's privileged relationship with France, which provided high levels of investment in education and significant regional prestige. His opportunity in Burkina-Faso and his visit to Paris reflected administrative ties within a region that was still dominated by the French. Importantly, Stéphane's passion for electronics also coincided with a global revolution in information technology. Arriving in the United States in 1992, he was in an optimal position to receive a specialist's training in a field with a dearth of qualified candidates, a situation that would lead to the controversial expansion of the temporary H1-B visa program in 2000.¹⁵⁴ Installed in a full-time professional position by 1998, Stéphane had the stable salary to build a financial portfolio that was diversified enough to cushion the recessionary shocks to come.

If Stéphane was relatively secure in his options, however, he was less invested than Jean-Paul in a particular professional outcome. In Stéphane's story, his interests emerged from the

¹⁵⁴ Enacted as part of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952, the H-1B visa is for temporary, nonimmigrant employment of certain designated "specialty occupations." The American Competitiveness in the Twenty-First Century Act of 2000 raised the statutory ceiling for available visas under this category by 297,500 over three years, primarily to meet the demand of employers in the technology industry.

contingencies of experience. He became an engineer because he had to fix his own radio. He learned about politics from surviving a *coup d'état* in a strange country. He moved to the United States because a professor answered his letter and stayed there because of a civil war at home. Stéphane's career could have turned out very differently: computer engineering was only one of many skills in a portfolio of personal, social, and financial assets that were constantly fluctuating in value. "You learn how to adapt," he told me, "when what you learned last year is already obsolete!" It seemed to me that Stéphane approached opportunities as a random walk rather than as points on a trajectory to an imagined goal. Of course, that walk was not random at all; his worldview had emerged from personal experiences and political circumstances that structured his options with privileges that Jean-Paul lacked. Yet Stéphane's interpretation of that history as contingent also suited the opportunity structures of financialization. Although he did not elaborate on the nature of his financial investments, the insurance industry may have been instrumental honing his appreciation for the art of risk.

I cannot prove a link between Stéphane's financial strategy and his cultural background, or his experiences of bringing a country into the information infrastructure. I can only assert that we are the reflection of the world into which we are born, and that my informants and I shared a part of that world in punctuated intervals over six years of our parallel lives. Many ethnographies have been written about the ethno-capitalist hybridity of postcolonial Africa, and some of them have influenced me greatly, no doubt inflecting my thoughts as I approached my fieldwork. Most importantly, I must admit that I only met Stéphane once; though I found his company delightful, we never came together again. This means that my representation of our encounter is a tableau that fits the details of our evening into a frame of mind. It is this question of a frame of mind that concerns me here, the ways in which we place ourselves where we need to be to get through the

time in our lives. The ethnolinguist Benjamin Lee Whorf, who was also in the insurance business, wrote that “our image of time as an evenly scaled limitless tape measure” encourages “behavior evincing a false sense of security or an assumption that all will always go smoothly, and a lack in foreseeing and protecting ourselves against hazards.”¹⁵⁵ Whorf was interested in how communication functions as a collective system that structures perceptions of reality. In Western language systems, the contingencies of life are “routinized” by the “*prorata* allocation of value to time, lending itself to the building up of a commercial structure based on time-prorata values: times wages..., rent, credit, interest, depreciation, charges, and insurance premiums.”¹⁵⁶ The regularity of wage-based income supports the death-denying use-values of everyday consumption, from fast-food and cutting-edge electronics to international tourism. That Stéphane had spent most of his life within the confines of such a work regime must have shaped his frame of mind as surely as it has shaped mine.

Insurance participates in the commodification of time by transforming the random, unavoidable events of individual futures into collective patterns that can be predicted and managed in the present. Yet, it also brings the possibility of misfortune and the certainty of death into focus as an abstract burden to be shared. Insurance is a technology that produces risk as capital. Actuaries use statistical techniques to calculate the probability of death, disability, and misfortune within a population, and underwriters use juridical techniques to distribute risk, cost, and compensation across a pool of policyholders. In this way, insurance converts uncertainty into security and loss into gain not by restoring what cannot be replaced but by fulfilling the terms of a contract. “The mutualities created by insurance have special characteristics,” writes Francois

¹⁵⁵ Benjamin Lee Whorf, *Language, Thought, and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1963), 154.

¹⁵⁶ Whorf, 153.

Ewald. “They are abstract mutualities, unlike the qualitative mutualities of the family, the corporation, the union, the commune.”¹⁵⁷ Commercial risk protects human capital independently of the complex personal obligations of social capital by ensuring its liquidity into monetary form. As one industry specialist noted in 2003, innovations in financial intermediation have transformed life insurance into a “human capital derivative,” a form of securitization that integrates the cash flow of assets and liabilities for diversified pools of individuals.¹⁵⁸ It is a two-sided strategy, hedging risk for the consumer while providing the insurer with liquidity, which protects present wealth from the uncertainty of the future.

In Stéphane’s case, insurance was a form of social capital. Insurance premiums and financial investments—such as pensions, real estate, stocks, bonds, and derivatives—are like remittances, regular payments that hedge risk for the migrant and provide cash flow in African communities. When he was laid off, income from those investments allowed him to continue supporting his family in Africa, just as his remittance payments had provided for their stability during the recent civil war. This analogy is supported by histories of commercial and state-sponsored insurance, which emerged in tandem with the mutual aid associations formed by workers in response to the dislocations of industrialization. As urban migration fragmented agrarian communities in Europe, “solidarity funds” generated a new infrastructure of support, pooling contributions to finance the emergency needs of members facing unemployment,

¹⁵⁷ François Ewald, “Insurance and Risk,” in *The Foucault Effect*, ed. Graham Burchell et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 203.

¹⁵⁸ Krzysztof Ostaszewski, “Is Life Insurance a Human Capital Derivatives Business?” *Journal of Insurance Issues* 26, no. 1 (2003): 1–14.

sickness, accidents, and death. Like today's diaspora organizations and rotating credit associations, they arranged for burials in hometowns and supported widows and orphans.¹⁵⁹

Unlike mutual aid associations, however, which rely on the social bonds of actual trust, insurance companies broker the aleatory contracts of future commitments. Historically, commercial insurance companies have distinguished themselves from morally suspect forms of speculation—such as gambling, lotteries, and stock market—by marketing themselves as self-help institutions that provide a collective means for individual security. England's 1774 Life Assurance Act ratified the industry's image of constitutive benevolence by requiring that insurers demonstrate an "interest" in the person being insured.¹⁶⁰ In this context, the word "interest" pertained to a personal concern with the preservation of a life over a pecuniary interest in a death. Yet an insurance company's interest in the well-being of the family also coincides with a commercial interest in the management of risk for profit. "Interest, in the restricted sense it is given in economic theory," wrote Bourdieu, "cannot be produced without producing its negative counterpart, disinterestedness."¹⁶¹ In this way, the "disinterestedness" of social capital, practiced as mutual aid, was both the extension and the antithesis of commodified risk. While the working poor were cultivating new forms of personal interdependence to cope with social fragmentation of factory work and city life, a professional middle class, reliant on earned income rather than property rents, established self-sufficiency by cultivating human capital through financial self-management.

¹⁵⁹ Daniel Defert, "'Popular Life' and Insurance Technology," in *The Foucault Effect*, ed. G. Burchell et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991) and D. Knights and T. Vurdubakis, "Calculations of Risk: Towards an Understanding of Insurance as a Moral and Political Technology," *Accounting Organizations and Society* 18 nos. 7/8 (1993): 729-764.

¹⁶⁰ Defert, "'Popular Life' and Insurance Technology," 739.

¹⁶¹ Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," 242.

Like any commodity, human capital appears as a fetish in which the cumulative social relations of personhood are objectified for sale. As described in the development literature, for example, expertise, training, and certification are investments that pay off not only materially but also in terms of social status, personal satisfaction, and national wealth.¹⁶² The rational individual who plays her cards right has engineered her persona in order to maximize her price as a private contractor for potential employers. Success is the result of planning, prudence, and personal responsibility.¹⁶³ Yet there is a catch built into this arrangement. Unlike the doubly-free owner of labor-power, the owner of human capital bears a double obligation: first, the personal debts accrued through education; and second, the ongoing imperative to maintain an acceptable credit rating by accumulating social capital. Because the business of life requires investors, the human capital strategy is a form of “accumulation by dispossession” through which an individual’s self-determination is expropriated.¹⁶⁴ High debts and low earnings undermine profit and growth. To avoid this scenario, Stéphane hedged his career goals by diversifying his own investments of time, money, and expectations. Part of a diaspora that was fractured by civil war, he avoided relying on social networks, preferring a more abstract form of collective security that provided maximum independence.¹⁶⁵ Unmarried and childless, he lived alone and valued his privacy. It appeared to me that he preferred experimentation to expectations, cultivating a personal

¹⁶² See, for example, “Building Human Capital” in World Bank Group, *World Development Report: The Changing Nature of Work* (Washington DC: International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 2019).

¹⁶³ This notion of entrepreneurial self-ownership was a tenet of the Mount Pelerin Society’s “neoliberal thought collective” and features prominently in the social sciences today. See Michel Feher, *Rated Agency: Investee Politics in a Speculative Age* (New York: Zone Books, 2018), 11–16.

¹⁶⁴ Morgan Adamson, “The Financialization of Student Life,” *Polygraph* 21 (2009): 97–110; Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 159-172.

¹⁶⁵ “Insurance provides a form of association which combines a maximum of socialization with a maximum of individualization. It allows people to enjoy the advantages of association while still leaving them free to exist as individuals.” Ewald, “Insurance and Risk,” 204.

philosophy that prioritized self-expression with an African sensibility. While he communicated regularly with his family, he kept his distance, insulating himself as well, perhaps, from the excessive demands of his community. His life choices were his own concern.

Though most of the working-age population of the Republic of Congo is underemployed, Jean-Paul had reason to expect that he, like Stéphane, would be an exception. The year he began college, 2002 marked the end of a period of civil war and the announcement of the victor Denis Sassou Nguesso's *Nouvelle Espérance* program. Under the auspices of the IMF's Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative, this eight-year development strategy included significant investments in education and transportation infrastructure.¹⁶⁶ At the HIPC finish line in 2010, the international community rewarded the country with the cancellation of a debt equaling a third of its GDP. Thanks to the exploitation of its significant oil and natural gas deposits, the Republic of Congo has enjoyed one of the highest growth rates on the subcontinent, earning it "middle-income" classification by the United Nations Development Program. Today, it is one of the most urbanized countries in the region and also one of the best educated: according to one recent study, residents of the country's two largest cities—Brazzaville and Pointe-Noire—average ten years of schooling, with more than 50 percent having completed primary school.¹⁶⁷ That study also found, however, that for those unable to secure government jobs, unemployment rates increase with level of education. Despite his own impressive development, Jean-Paul was not one of those lucky few. Though he, like Stéphane, benefitted from education and employment networks across West Africa, the transportation infrastructure

¹⁶⁶ International Monetary Fund, *Republic of Congo: Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper: IMF Country Report 12/242* (Washington DC: IMF, 2012).

¹⁶⁷ Mathias Kuepie and Christophe J. Nordman, *Education et marches du travail à Pointe Noire (Congo-Brazzaville)*, (UMR Dial Working Paper 11, Paris: Institute de Recherche Pour le Développement, 2011).

has been subject to notorious neglect throughout the subcontinent.¹⁶⁸ Thus, he was unable to gain a foothold in a highly competitive field dominated by European and Middle Eastern airlines. Nevertheless, his promotion at Pagel Brothers indicated that his human capital was finally being recognized.

Jean-Claude had faith in the value of his aeronautical training. Although he had entered the United States without money, recognized credentials, or regular work authorization, he was banking on the social capital of his church connections to create the conditions for his human capital to eventually be realized. Jean-Paul's conviction in the future rewards of his efforts resonated with the World Bank's Human Capital Project, which defines human capital as "the knowledge, skills, and health that people accumulate throughout their lives, enabling them to realize their potential as productive members of society."¹⁶⁹ The legacies of both Becker and Bourdieu are apparent in project-related reports that acknowledge the "intrinsic value" of investments in health and education while quantifying their future productivity in a Human Capital Index. In a global economy of rapid automation and growing inequality, the risk of mass unemployment demands a "new social contract" of massive public investment, financed through higher taxation.¹⁷⁰ In the absence of such a social safety net, Jean-Paul could not risk compromising his precarious position, with respect to the good will of his hosts and the recipients of his remittances, by challenging the unreasonable expectations of his employer. The leap of faith animating his dream of the future had landed him in a nightmare of potentiality without escape.

¹⁶⁸ Heinrich C. Bofinger, *Air Transport: Challenges to Growth. Background Paper 16, Africa Infrastructure Country Diagnostic* (Washington DC: World Bank, 2008).

¹⁶⁹ World Bank Group, "Building Human Capital," 50.

¹⁷⁰ World Bank Group, 124–38.

Amina shared both Jean-Paul's desire for professional advancement and Stéphane's skepticism with respect to institutional recognition and the stability of the market. She continually diversified her revenue streams, assessing the risks and hedging her bets to stay afloat despite disappointing outcomes, betrayals of trust, or failures of capacity. Once she had decided to give up her retail business, she gradually liquidated her inventory by selling to members of her network, arbitraging between markets in the United States, Senegal, and Mali. While it seemed odd at first that she gave away so much merchandise, I began to realize that her relationships were not a neutral resource but a potential source of support that loses value once it is utilized. She preferred to be perceived as a giver rather than a taker. She left college having decided that the social capital of her family and friends would provide a more durable safety net than a diploma. Later they furnished the loans that allowed her to earn a degree that she hoped would bring more stability to her life. Amina's relationships condensed possibilities for both positive and negative transformations of value, not unlike Stéphane's stocks and bonds. For both of them, the management of affective and financial resources was a knowing practice that sought to balance personal goals with the needs of others.

The difference in orientation between the owner of human capital, who accumulates and bears value, and the portfolio manager, who takes and bears risk, is consequential when the future loses continuity with the past. Under circumstances in which expectations bear out in practice, narrative has the power to repress elements of failure and waste by resolving contradictory elements within a linear trajectory. It is through such retrospective instantiation that the value of labor in production is realized through exchange. When there is no market for a commodity, however, the producer and the merchant are stranded with an excess that appears as waste, whereas the investor can hedge losses. In the words of Joseph Vogl and Christopher Reid,

“future expectations are translated into expected futures, and the forces of time are tamed.”¹⁷¹

Thus, Stéphane’s capital was insured. Whereas Jean-Paul and Amina were forced to bear the risk of their investment, Stéphane’s financial portfolio cushioned the impact of his unemployment.

Whatever came of their pursuit for prosperity, my informants participated in a middle-class imaginary defined less by productivity than the circulation of value across fractured spatiotemporal terrains. Amina exchanged debts and commodities to extract marginal gains across thresholds of value. Describing herself as a resilient survivor in an ever-changing present, she negotiated multiple roles with a concrete dividuality that made commitments yet also kept options open. For Stéphane, who invested in emerging African markets, wealth was the lucky accident of freedom from want that translated into the gift of time. He described his prospects retrospectively as the random walk of uncertainty. Having insured himself as an abstract dividual within a population, his privilege was less the consequence of merit than the accidents of history.¹⁷² Yet Stéphane had attained his “risk class membership”—an abstract determination of insurability—by assuming the individuality of a bourgeois subject.¹⁷³ Conversely, Jean-Paul’s backward glance represented an individual deserving prospects. In his single-minded determination to become a pilot, he sought to realize a fair price for the cumulative product of past efforts, even as he assumed the dividual interdependency of debtor in his social relations. His conception of personhood as personal value was encouraged at Pagel Brothers, where

¹⁷¹ Joseph Vogl and Christopher Reid, “Taming Time: Media of Financialization,” *Grey Room* 46 (2012): 72–83.

¹⁷² The anthropological term “dividual,” introduced to describe the partible person of social relations that do not presuppose autonomy, has been used to describe the abstract interdependency of debt under financialization. For a summary of the concept and its relevance to the anthropology of Africa, see Susan Rasmussen, “Personhood, Self, Difference and Dialogue,” *International Journal for Dialogical Science* 3, no. 1 (2008): 31–54. I take up the concept of dividuality in the Introduction, Chapter 4, and Chapter 4.

¹⁷³ D. Knights and T. Vurdubakis (1993), *op cit*, p. 732.

employees were treated not as workers selling their labor-time for a wage but as self-employed owners of human capital, freed from the protections of a unionized workplace. “Team members” entered into contracts with the factory just as the factory entered into contracts with the corporate manufacturer, which presumably contributed to national wealth. Yet stock markets do not reflect this orderly arrangement. Fluctuations in the price of commodities, currencies, stocks, and bonds have an indeterminate yet decisive impact on the lives of the workers who bear the most risk.

Moishe Postone identified the central contradiction of capitalism as the gap between the way things are and the way they could be. As long as value is the source of wealth, he argued, the social division of time is dominated by accelerating exploitation, even as most of the world’s people are underemployed and must exploit themselves.¹⁷⁴ Yet as automation floods markets with low-value commodities produced by fewer workers, surplus value appears as human and material waste. What good is a trunk full of sundresses that cannot be sold? Today’s wealthiest companies produce not commodities but information, which informs algorithms for the management of mounting existential risk. Perhaps the contradiction between our enormous systemic wealth and its increasingly narrow distribution points beyond itself, towards a form of social organization that no longer feeds on the future. The virtual wealth of finance could be claimed as an actual “solidarity fund” that can provide for us all. Freed from the compulsion towards over-production, competition, and conspicuous consumption, we would practice our knowledge as an open-ended present in which Stéphane would keep painting, Amina would study, and Jean-Paul would fly.

¹⁷⁴ Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, 34–36.

CONCLUSION

Integration by Exception

I am not certain that anyone ever leaves home. When “home” drops below the horizon, it rises in one’s breast and acquires the overwhelming power of menaced love.

—James Baldwin, *Every Goodbye Ain’t Gone*, 1977

I did not know which was Death’s road among these roads, and when I thought within myself that as it was the market day, and all the market goers would soon be returning from the market—I lied down on the middle of the roads, I put my head to one of the roads, my left hand to one, right hand to another one, and my both feet to the rest, after that I pretended as I had slept there.

—Amos Tutuola, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, 1952

In mid-August 2013, I was surprised to receive a call from José, Jean-Paul’s coworker at Pagel Brothers. He gently informed me that my friend had died in an automobile accident on his way home from work the previous Saturday. Jean-Paul must have fallen asleep at the wheel. “He told me about you,” he said. “I wanted to be sure that you knew.”

Jean-Paul’s memorial service was on a sweltering summer day. It was well attended by the church community that had sponsored Jean-Paul’s migration to the United States. The parking lot was full of late-model cars, and the church was full of well-dressed mourners. Scanning the program, I found that Jean-Paul was still listed among the congregants, and I noticed Vietnamese, Sri Lankan, and Spanish surnames. I sought signs of my anger in the faces of the muted crowd. Was this diversity a reflection of the church’s missionary presence? How many others had fallen victim to their promises of freedom and prosperity? I sat with a small contingent of African friends that Jean-Paul had met during his rare excursions into the city: two men from Brazzaville, one from DRC, and a financial planner from Cameroon whom I had met before at an arts event. Sandrine arrived with Maxine, a woman from Abidjan who had been

dating Jean-Paul on and off for about eight months. It had been a difficult relationship; she had complained that he had too little time for her and no money to spend. Now Maxine appeared disoriented. Sandrine never left her side. They had all chosen to wear western dress clothes for the occasion.

During the service, Mike gave a moving account of his and Jean-Paul's friendship and the personal discoveries he made in Congo and those Jean-Paul made in Illinois. He made my friend's adjustment sound so seamless that I wanted to confront him later. Yet when I introduced myself to Mike and he took my hand, I saw the grief in his eyes, so I kept my thoughts to myself.

It took me a while to spot José. He stood in the corner of the church lobby where the reception was being held. He was slender and dark, just turning silver at the temples, in a blazer that was a little too large in the shoulders. As I approached, the grim determination on his face softened into an ironic smile. He seemed eager to talk, so I suggested we meet somewhere else where we could speak openly.

Settled into a booth at a nearby Mexican restaurant, José's story poured forth, seething with anger, guilt, and resignation. A week after Jean-Paul's death, an Occupational Safety and Health (OSHA) investigator finally arrived on the scene. "I called OSHA before," he said. "I called them two years ago. I called them a year ago. I think the only reason they finally paid attention was because immigration got involved." The investigator informed the workers that he had given the factory eight months to improve their safety practices. A few days later, trainers with Optimum, a new contract company, met with the line workers to announce certain changes. Masks were distributed, and workers were instructed to wear them whenever people they did not recognize were in the factory.

“Do you know who buys your product?” the trainer asked them through an interpreter. They had never bothered with interpreters during previous meetings. “Sprint, Verizon, and Apple. These are massive companies that want to protect their international reputations. If those buyers find out that you’re working like Chinese, then they’ll just go there instead, where they can get the same product even cheaper, and you won’t have a job. Do you understand what I’m saying?” He was yelling at them as though it was their fault that they were being exploited. “I’m here to help you do your part to keep American jobs right here, in America.”

José opened a folder full of documents and took out a memo. “A few days later, I got this.” He had been selected to represent his department for a Safety Team Meeting. “Your attendance at this meeting is Mandatory.” This was not an invitation; it was an assignment. At the meeting, José was instructed to draft a report describing any and all safety issues in his department. He handed me a photocopy of his report. It was neat and clearly written. Months after the explosion, there were still no fire extinguishers within a 50–60 square foot area. In fact, the boxes originally designated to contain extinguishers were currently being utilized as toolboxes. Also, air hoses and power tool cables covered the floor, where they got tangled up and were easy to trip over. He described resistance by some workers to new safety measures: they were using radio headphones instead of earplugs, they weren’t using safety shields when grinding aluminum materials. “They will get tired of this and we will go right back to the way we used to work,” someone was anonymously quoted as saying. However, José was most critical of management:

Supervisors are under pressure to ensure production. That means they are not always sensitive to complaints and concerns of employees. Employees are often unwilling to report incidents and injuries because they are afraid of dismissal and replacement.

Of sixteen department representatives, José was the only person to file a report. “They couldn’t do it,” he said. “They didn’t know enough English. But it was mainly because they didn’t want to get fired. I was one of the only shop workers with a green card.” He told me that he had started working at Pagel Brothers as a temporary worker in 2003 during a crunch period. He was picked up as a permanent employee for a \$2.00 raise and health benefits in 2005, but most of the temps were undocumented and stayed with the agency. Most of them disappeared in 2008. Then work started picking up again, and the factory was full of new faces. “They were worried about keeping production on schedule. We were working so much that the warehouses filled up, and they had to store product off-site. Then the explosion.” José looked out the window for a long time. A middle-aged man was standing on the sidewalk holding a bunch of mylar balloons. A young woman with two small children walked up to him. Then a family spilled out of a minivan with shopping bags full of presents.

“More people were going to get hurt,” José mumbled. “I had to do something.” He told me about the day a few weeks ago when he got to work and everyone was gone. Even the supervisors. Seventy-eight people were fired in one day alone. “The company gave them absolutely nothing. No severance, not even a tank of gas. One minute they were working, the next they were out.” That was also the week that new machines were installed. “Four robots do exactly the same things that fifteen of us used to do,” he said.

“I wonder what Jean-Paul would think?” I asked him.

“He’d probably want to build one,” José smiled. “He never belonged on the floor with us. But *chingado*, we didn’t either. The new employees are mostly white people. They got hired directly by the company for \$20 an hour. “That’s more than I’ll ever get paid. You know what’s funny? My second week I fell down, fractured a rib and went right on working, just like a

machine, because I needed that job. Any of us could have died in that explosion, but still we kept on throwing our lives away. And now they're buying robots to replace us. It's like we brought it on ourselves.”

The explosion appears to have been a turning point for Pagel Brothers. In late 2013 they were faced with three Workers Compensation cases and fined \$51,480 for eleven safety and health violations. This was not the Pagel Brothers' first OSHA citation, but a new website launched in August 2013 created the impression that it would be their last. A payroll of 300 employees shrank to a 150-member “production team” specializing in “high-value, complex assemblies.” While Pagel Brothers had always provided custom design and manufacturing services, the new website advertised full vertical integration, from engineering and product testing to inventory and logistical support. Technical language was accompanied by a list of targeted applications and a global customer base.

In 2017 the company hired a former insurance risk underwriter to serve as marketing director and underwent yet another makeover. Another new website showcased a management philosophy of diversity, communication, and peer engagement; a commitment to environmental sustainability; and continuous technological upgrades.¹ For a year, a Twitter feed posted headlines from mainstream and industry news sources promoting the importance of global

¹ Pagel Brothers has taken advantage of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) incentives in the past. The company's file with the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), which has not been updated since 2009, indicates that it is a woman-owned business, and lists the owner's wife as primary contact. She is also listed on Buzzfile as Board Chair, though the website and my ethnography both identify Joe Pagel as the founder and leader of the company. Although the 2017 website revision emphasized environmental concerns, no “buy green” boxes were checked on the SEC report. Pagel Brothers did contribute in 2008 to the Foundation for the Global Compact, “a non-binding United Nations pact to encourage businesses worldwide to adopt sustainable and socially responsible policies, and to report on their implementation.” However, the company was expelled in 2011 for failing to communicate progress. In 2017, Pagel Brothers acquired certification by EcoVadis, a commercial platform that rates corporate environmental and social sustainability. See <https://ecovadis.com/>.

economic integration and the internet of things. Short videos showcased each robotic upgrade. Motivational essays on collaboration appeared alongside photographs from trade shows and employee celebrations.² In April 2018 the marketing director left abruptly, and Pagel Brothers disappeared from social media. Amidst controversy over steel and aluminum tariffs, which posed a particular threat to the metal fabrications industry, the company signed onto a “Country First” letter supporting President Donald Trump’s efforts to “see that America gets a better deal” in its trade relations with China.³

Founded in 1994, Pagel Brothers was the kind of small and medium enterprise that defined the new economy of neoliberalism. Locally owned and operated, the company was poised to absorb machinists who had lost union jobs in Chicago’s industrial corridor at a fraction of the cost. As states slashed government entitlement programs, industry fled the area and workers had to take what they could get at lower hourly wages, with less job security and poorer

² Pagel Brothers opened a Better Business Bureau file in 2017 listing 110 employees, though internet reviews indicated that the company was downsizing during this time.

³ The politics of global trade have bitterly divided manufacturers. In March 2018, President Trump announced the decision to impose tariffs of 25 percent on steel imports and 10 percent on aluminum imports, a move that provoked retaliatory tariffs on U.S. goods in many countries. Statements against the tariffs were immediately released by the Fabricators and Manufacturers Association Intl., Air-Conditioning, Heating, and Refrigeration Institute (AHRI), Precision Metalforming Association, and the National Tooling and Machining Association. Taking a neutral position, one trade magazine for the metal fabrication industry conducted an informal opinion survey among their readers and was attacked as biased from both sides. Responses indicated their relative precarity within the supply chain. See Vicki Bell, “What Fabricators Think of the Steel and Aluminum Tariffs,” *The Fabricator*, March 7, 2018. Many of them supported a letter signed by over 600 companies and trade associations opposing the tariffs. (“Tariffs Hurt the Heartland,” June 13, 2019) Pagel Brothers was one of more than 600 business to sign onto a second, “Country First” letter sponsored by the protectionist Coalition for a Prosperous America, claiming that the tariffs have already boosted jobs and lowered costs for small businesses. The letter was submitted before the Office of the United States Trade Representative (USTR) on June 13, 2019, during hearings regarding an additional \$300 billion tariffs in Chinese imports proposed by the Trump administration. Both Pagel and his wife are registered with the Republican party and contributed to the reelection campaign of a local Republican congressman.

benefits.⁴ Health management organizations (HMOs) replaced private insurance, and retirement benefits took the form of mutual funds, transforming half of the population into stockholders.⁵ “For any way of thought to become dominant,” David Harvey begins his political history of neoliberalism, “a conceptual apparatus has to be advanced that appeals to our intuitions and instincts, to our values and our desires, as well as to the possibilities inherent in the social world we inhabit.”⁶ In political debates, boardrooms, and universities throughout the United States, the Smithian ideal of the individual owner-entrepreneur had been resurrected from the ashes of managerialism to rationalize the transfer of risk to employees and consumers.⁷ Along the same lines, companies like Pagel Brothers fashioned themselves as flexible contractors prepared to assume the risk of procurement, coordination, and just-in-time delivery for large public corporations.⁸

⁴ See Christine Walley, *Exit Zero: Family and Class in Postindustrial Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

⁵ “The proportion of households that invested in mutual funds increased from under 6 percent in 1980 to nearly half by 2000, and the proportion of household financial assets in stocks, bonds, mutual funds, and retirement accounts increased from 50 percent in 1989 to 69 percent in 2004.” Gerald F. Davis, *Managed by the Markets: How Finance Re-Shaped America* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press 2009), 114. The financialization of retirement benefits is a global phenomenon. See Hadas Weiss (2015) “Financialization and Its Discontents: Israelis Negotiating Pensions,” *American Anthropologist* 117, no. 3 (2015): 506–18.

⁶ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007), 5.

⁷ See Davis, *Managed by the Markets*; Karen Ho, *Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 169–212; Gerard Dumenil and Dominique Levy, *The Crisis of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

⁸ In late 2004, Pagel Brothers completed the lengthy and expensive process of 9001 certification by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), a voluntary compliance framework designed to address information asymmetry in global supply chains. The International Organization for Standardization (ISO), composed of representatives from national proprietary, industrial, and commercial standards organizations, was launched in 1947 to facilitate international trade. ISO 9000 series certifications require that a facility establish a written quality assurance policy, specify internal quality targets, regularly review progressive’s via internal audits, provide training to employees, and designate a quality assurance manager. Matthew Potoski and Aseem Prakash, “Informational Asymmetries as Trade Barriers,” *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 28, no. 2 (2009): 221–38.

A new paradigm of integrated manufacturing and total quality management was reconfiguring the workplace as a logistical node within a global infrastructure. Each iteration of the Pagel Brothers' website displayed a step in the company's transformation from producer of commodities to provider of services, from employer of labor to contractor of human capital, and from capital investor to financial asset.⁹ "How to Set Up a Lean Factory That Works," headlined a 2017 article from *Industry News*, posted to the Pagel Brothers' Twitter feed. "A lean factory, or lean-oriented production layout, creates a seamless flow of people, material and information." A picture of "the Pagel Brothers team" features thirty-five smiling women and men, mostly young and white with a few Asian faces, in business casual dress. Other photos show workers in full protective gear operating machines. Are they also members of the team or have they been hired on a short-term basis to meet a sudden spike in demand?

Harvey coined the term "flexible accumulation" to describe the adaptation of work arrangements to the volatile, highly-competitive markets that have accompanied the financial restructuring of corporations. Nonstandard work arrangements allow "high performance work organizations" to survive by focusing on core competencies without sacrificing liquidity: the capacity to immediately convert assets into cash flow. "The financial system has achieved a degree of autonomy from real production unprecedented in capitalism's history," Harvey

⁹ "Total Quality Management (TQM) is a system of industrial quality control originally attributed to statistical engineer W. Edwards Deming, who was involved in the reconstruction of Japanese manufacturing during the Allied occupation following the Second World War. Thirty years later, when Japanese imports accompanied deindustrialization and the financialization of corporations in the United States, TQM became a pervasive framework for the reorganization of both private and public organizations. See William M. Tsutsui, "W. Edwards Deming and the Origins of Quality Control in Japan," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 22, no. 2 (1996): 295–325; and James W. Dean et al., "Integrated Manufacturing and Job Design," *The Academy of Management Journal* 34, no. 4 (1991): 776–804.

observed in 1989, “carrying capitalism into an era of equally unprecedented financial dangers.”¹⁰ Today, public corporations borrow in order to finance stock buybacks that appear as profits on their balance sheets, while private, “debt-free” firms such as Pagel Brothers manage erratic requisitions by selling equity, cutting labor costs, and leveraging fixed assets to sustain cash flow.¹¹

Insofar as every surplus entails a debt, risks accumulate alongside capital. Every factor of production—people, material, and information—has its shadow. Exploited migrant workers, industrial waste, and lost human connections are “moments of capital” that fail insofar as they are not priced.¹² Jean-Paul’s death, the aluminum dust explosion, and José’s whistleblowing exposed gaps that threatened the “seamless flow” of value in the market. As with the value transformations described by Nancy Munn, any transaction contains a negative potentiality that derives from the claim of the excluded other. “Every act of keeping for oneself, giving, or receiving (as for instance obtaining something not made available to others) contains this negative potentiality—a potentiality that may or may not be actualized—actualization only occurring, of course, by a process of reading backward from the negative value signs of later disturbing events.”¹³ Munn’s informants in Gawa addressed this problem through didactic speech

¹⁰ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1989), 194. Also see Steven P. Vallas, “Rethinking Post-Fordism: The Meaning of Workplace Flexibility,” *Sociological Theory* 17, no. 1 (1999): 68–101; and Arne Kalleberg, “Flexible Firms and Labor Market Segmentation,” *Work and Occupations* 30, no. 2 (2003): 154–75.

¹¹ On its latest website, Pagel Brothers advertises itself as a debt-free, “privately held company that operates well into the safe zone of the Altman Z-Score financial health rating formula for private manufacturers.” Along with ISO 9001 and EcoVadis certifications, an Altman Z-Score advertises resilience for private companies without stock market ratings. Pagel Brothers contracts with Fortune 500 companies. A 2014 study found that 91 percent of earnings by companies listed on Standard and Poor’s 500 index were spent on shares of their own stock and shareholder dividends. See William Lazonick, “Profits Without Prosperity,” *Harvard Business Review*, September 2014.

¹² Max Kashefi, “Social Capital in High Performance Work Organizations,” *International Review of Modern Sociology* 38, no. 1 (2012): 65–91.

¹³ Nancy D. Munn, *The Fame of Gawa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 223.

that brought out the contradiction between alienated part and inclusive whole, reconstituting spatiotemporal control by performatively “negating the negation.”¹⁴ Likewise, Pagel Brothers updated its website to “transform the unmediated intersubjective spacetime of domination ... back into the moderated, ideally equalizing order of spacetime formed by relations of influence.”¹⁵ Once priced, past deficits were leveraged into the marketable assets of “teamwork,” “sustainability,” and “quality”—privileged signifiers that organized a dynamic field of associations.¹⁶ These “shared values” indicate the acts of arbitrage, such as automation and ISO certification, through which Pagel Brothers patched its broken infrastructure.

Anthropologists have used the metaphor of infrastructure to convey this dual sense of flow and ossification as social relations shift and rupture in response to global forces. In her ethnography of women entrepreneurs in Cairo, for example, Julia Elyachar shows how microenterprise programs engender social networks as channels supporting new modalities of monetary circulation. Elyachar combines Marx’s notion of labor power with Bronislaw Malinowski’s concept of “phatic communication,” which stresses the functionality of the speech act, to describe the “phatic labor” that goes into creating a semiotic commons.¹⁷ Her informants did not cultivate connections in order to realize particular goals; they expanded and improvised on existing relations, distributing access to proliferating international circuits, from pooled

¹⁴ Munn, 248. “All these contradictions are formulated in the speech, and are ‘spoken at once’ in a transformative mode that attempts to overcome them or negate the negation and create a unity by divesting the community of witchcraft.”

¹⁵ Munn, 235.

¹⁶ Munn, 249. Referencing Claude Lévi-Strauss’s notion of the “conceptual tool” or “operator,” Munn describes how privileged signifiers in didactic speech form a “dynamic field of connections.” See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Wild Thought*, trans. J. Mehlman and J. Leavitt (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 151-1.

¹⁷ Julia Elyachar, “Phatic Labor, Infrastructure, and the Question of Empowerment in Cairo,” *American Ethnologist* 37, no. 3 (2010): 452–64.

remittances to commercial credit and cellphones. By treating everyday communication as labor, Elyachar collapses the distinction between productive and reproductive activity, use and exchange values within a political economy that transforms information into forms of wealth, commodifying signs themselves. In another paper on Egypt's January 25th Revolution, Elyachar considers how communications infrastructures—understood as the “relatively stable outcome of human practices”—became visible when they were disrupted by the state, creating opportunities for “pirate and alternative infrastructures, patching together whatever worked to keep up contact with each other and with the outside world.”¹⁸

In her ethnography of state-citizen struggles over real estate in China, Julie Chu extends the network from relations among neighbors to bricks and mortar and the legal apparatus. Like Elyachar, Chu focuses attention on the invisible work of the virtual link, the possibility that is actualized in disruption rather than the fulfillment of an intention. Insofar as agency is embedded in infrastructure, its exposure through renovation or breakdown interrupts tacit articulations of form in ways that may partition certain relations while suturing others. “Thinking infrastructurally,” she writes, “is not just a self-referential exercise for tracing the internal parts of a technical system; it demands an outward orientation to the resonance of things unfolding on other social planes and, in turn, to distributive forms of agency drawing efficacy from links to elsewhere and elsewhen.”¹⁹ For Chu, normativity literally paves over the unconscious source of practical activity until it is disrupted counter-performatively by others, challenging relations

¹⁸ Julia Elyachar, “Upending Infrastructure: Tamarod, Resistance, and Agency after the January 25th Revolution in Egypt,” *History and Anthropology* 25, no. 4 (2014): 462–63. Elyachar’s argument draws from AbdouMaliq Simone’s “People as Infrastructure: Intersecting Fragments in Johannesburg,” *Public Culture* 16, no. 3 (2004): 407–29.

¹⁹ Julie Y. Chu, “When Infrastructures Attack: The Workings of Disrepair in China,” *American Ethnologist* 41, no. 2 (2014): 353.

within and among persons, as well as among citizens, the built environment, and the state. Both Elyachar and Chu demonstrate how problem events create opportunities both to subvert the *status quo* and reinstate it on new grounds, diffusing the field for claims of victory or blame. In my ethnography, such indeterminate situations are often arbitrated by structuring virtual relations in the form of a gift.

Financial markets counter-performatively generate the conditions of their own possibility by encompassing all possibilities as the capacity to adapt. Ben Bernanke, who as chair of the Federal Reserve had orchestrated the government's role as "dealer of last resort" in 2008, criticized mainstream macroeconomists for failing to recognize the plasticity of debt during the crisis. When the household cash flow was constrained by rising mortgage payments and falling property values, consumers lost access to nonmortgage credit when they needed it most. They should have been able to hedge the crisis and avoid default.²⁰ Denied the option to diversify their exposure to risk, many people were forced outside of the system. Bearing the brunt of panic, they became subject *to* rather than subjects *of* arbitrage. They were risk-bearers who were unable to take their own risks. "The unexpected collapse of a bridge should lead us to try to improve bridge design and inspection, rather than to rethink basic physics," Bernanke concluded.²¹

But what if failure is intrinsic to the structure of the market? "Capital markets are capable of transforming all the future and all the past into the present," explained the head of Israel's central bank in 1999. "When individuals go to the market, they bring all their memories about

²⁰ Chu, 32.

²¹ Ben Bernanke, *The Real Effects of the Financial Crisis* (BPEA Conference Drafts, Brookings Papers on Economic Activity, The Brookings Institution, September 13–14, 2018). Also see Perry Mehrling, *The New Lombard Street: How the Fed Became the Dealer of Last Resort* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

the past and act on all their expectations about the future.”²² For financial economists, this present is all that exists, which is what they mean when they say that the market contains all the necessary information. However, as Hyman Minsky observed, assuming that price represents the future in the present may overestimate the liquidity of social investments, the real assets on which its monetary liabilities are based.²³ The past haunts the future as a threat of illiquidity, operating as an inherent instability within a system of appearances that represses difference through arbitrage. This instability only intensifies as the wealth generated by speculative activity outstrips the possibility of future profits. The sociotechnical infrastructure of finance contains this instability until it erupts as a counter-performative break, exposing a non-relation between the real asset and its monetary valuation. Yet this non-relation is also a new relation insofar as price is a “real fact” with impact of its own, adapting the field for the next round of play.

Performative Contradictions

This dissertation has approached economy, law, and politics as performative contradictions of contemporary capitalism. Since currency replaced gold as the epicenter of international trade in the 1970s, finance has emerged as the dominant regime of capital accumulation, reconfiguring the rules and processes through which we engage with institutions and, to a significant extent, with each other. Central to this process of financialization is the

²² Cited in Davis, *Managed by the Markets*, 95. Davis elaborates: “In the American system, share price is like a global positioning system for those managing corporations. Yet share price provides a peculiar measure of value because it is based on expectations about the future, rooted in present day information. Prior performance is rewarded only and as far as it provides information about what future performance will be. Moreover, market value depends in large part on what other participants think market value should be.”

²³ Hyman P. Minsky, *The Financial Instability Hypothesis* (Working Paper No. 74, Jerome Levy Economics Institute, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY: Bard College, May 1992, 2–3.)

strategy called “arbitrage,” buying and selling the same asset in different markets in order to profit from disparities in price. Arbitrage is contradictory: it performs the “law of one price” yet it is only possible by virtue of the failure of that model. Arbitrage also generates new disparities, counter-performatively undermining the premise of equilibrium on which it is based.

I have used this financial term broadly to capture how expectations are both conditions of and obstacles to outcomes. Like the efficient market, the rule of law and political membership are models that are performatively sustained and counter-performatively threatened by their own knowledge practices. The market-maker who makes new commodities available generates her own competition; the undocumented migrant who does essential work is breaking the law; activists who mobilize a marginalized constituency entrench or debilitate institutions they seek to reform. An infrastructure becomes visible when it breaks, instigating a repair that is not a simple restoration but a new normalization. A mutation is retroactively interpreted as necessary because evolutionary narratives cannot avoid the teleology of the backward glance. In recent years, however, the counter-performativity of liberal modernity has ruptured everyday expectations even in wealthy countries. The day-to-day management of contingency calls for skepticism and speculation, what my informants call *debrouillardise*, or making do, and I call “knowing practice.”

Climate change, mass underemployment, and the deacceleration of aggregate growth are secular trends indicating that the capitalist mode of production may have a limit. A future event of systemic meltdown is a central feature of our contemporary moment, inspiring dread and denial, on one hand, and a frenzy of financial and social arbitrage, on the other. Over the decade during which I conducted fieldwork and wrote this dissertation, the “post-crisis period” following the financial crash of 2008 passed through an inter-crisis recovery and into a new

cycle of crisis, more dramatic than the last. First, the cumulative effects of global warming have reached a tipping point, as record temperatures, devastating fires, and flooding have put new stress on the real estate and insurance industries in the Global North. Extreme weather events and rising sea levels, which had been intensifying in equatorial regions for decades, suddenly became a pressing matter of global governance, not only with respect to carbon emissions but also the prospect of massive climate-related population displacement in the near future. Second, the Covid-19 virus actualized what scenario planners had been anticipating for years, a global pandemic that exceeded the control of atrophied public health systems.

These events are the most recent manifestations of dynamics addressed in this dissertation. Climate change and contagious disease are policy arenas in which new laws and regulatory procedures collateralize financial markets, which have demonstrated their resilience with every new crisis. These laws and processes also generate discourse in which the figure of the migrant features as mere life that can be killed but not sacrificed in a pre-apocalyptic state of emergency, a temporal suspension that ends only by changing the world as we know it. “How did crisis, habitually a signifier for a critical, decisive moment, come to be construed as an experiential or historical condition?” asks Janet Roitman.²⁴ Constant crisis is an oxymoron, habitually invoked to describe nonhabitual events. Converting crisis into a *habitus*—a social field of structured and structuring practices—represses the awareness that the most rigorous contingency planning leads to unpredictable outcomes.²⁵ Is this why airport security, border

²⁴ “*J’ai la crise!*” remarked Roitman’s informants, not in a moment of panic but as a chronic complaint accompanied by material and psychic adjustments for making do in the present. Janet Roitman, “Africa Otherwise,” in *African Futures: Essays on Crisis, Emergence, and Possibility*, ed. B. Goldstone and J. Obarrio (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 23.

²⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. trans. R. Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 72–95.

patrols, and vaccines only increase anxiety and resistance? The diagnosis of crisis cannot restore order because it is a chronic disease, something broken that can't be fixed.

Neither can it be escaped. Africans seeking stability through migration can get caught up in new cycles of powerlessness. "Crisis follows you like the sun," Pastor Nkara said in a sermon. "It shows up wherever you go!" In 2006, James Ferguson wrote about Africa as an unthought lacuna that was both constitutive of and outside the "planetary network of connected points" that constituted the global.²⁶ Two years later, the subprime mortgage crisis repeated the foreclosure of postcolonial African states as the new normal of the postindustrial West. It became evident, quite suddenly, that in a global economy driven by debt, *most* people grow up in a state of foreclosure. Any moral distinction between those who can successfully leverage risk and those "at risk" dissolves before the collective risks that are brought on by "the savage sorting of winners and losers," Saskia Sassen's apt phrase for financialization of the planet.²⁷ As speculative fiction permeates popular culture, we prepare ourselves with scenarios of the disasters to come. Meanwhile, austerity politics demand the resilience that is being demonstrated by financial markets after every shock: what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. This is also the spirit that motivates emigration, even at risk of death, when the differential of prospects between staying and leaving is debatable.

This dissertation has documented how knowing practices of speculation emerge from the systematic surrender of social wealth to financial markets. Not all my informants were skilled at assessing the potential value of our assets, nor were they preoccupied with threats and

²⁶ James Ferguson, *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 5.

²⁷ Saskia Sassen, *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

opportunities every time they followed through on a commitment. By migrating, however, they had arbitrage in common, having made an uncertain bid for a more secure future. Outcomes are never as predictable as they appear in retrospect. Whether our decisions are wise, effective, or just is a judgement that belongs to the new past, after the ethical moment has passed. This is why emergent norms of conduct appear self-evident in a universe of moral ambiguity. Radical events may change everything, but that change is experienced as a way of being that was there all along. This argument has unfolded over five chapters that approach my informants' lives from the standpoints of thought, politics, history, law, and work. These chapters feature five cross-cutting themes: 1) financialization as arbitrage; 2) the double securitization of derivatives and police; 3) the limits of human rights; 4) the trauma trap of history in the future tense; and 5) the network security of knowing practice. I briefly revisit them here.

Financialization as Arbitrage

Boundary and bridge, zone of exclusion, and site of registration, the border is a technology for managing the operations of extraction, logistics, and finance that drive the global economy. With new powers of surveillance, states have both externalized borders via checkpoints and detention facilities abroad, and internalized borders via the immigration-related activities of local authorities.²⁸ Historically, capitalism has drawn territories and populations into its circuit through a process of “primitive accumulation,” multiplying channels for capital investment and manufacturing new needs and desires to be met through expanded production and consumption. Today, supply chains bridge national boundaries, creating economies of scale that distribute commodities everywhere and put the world's workers into competition. Yet as

²⁸ Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

capital homogenizes everything by giving it a price, it also requires heterogeneity in order to valorize itself. Borders preserve the inequalities that allow capitalism to function.

Capital is always the product of speculation. The capitalist manufactures a commodity with the assumption that its value will be realized in the market. The worker accepts a job with the assumption that she will be paid. The consumer buys the commodity with the assumption that the object will meet her desire. The investor sets this cycle into motion by providing the capital to set up shop, expecting that investment to reproduce itself over time. As it accumulates, capital circulates through many forms: as commodities, assets, information, and infrastructure. The deregulation of financial markets has increased capital liquidity, allowing investors to manage temporal uncertainty by converting assets into currency with minimal constraints. Thus, while management of risk appears to stabilize markets, it also increases volatility by increasing the volume of transactions. Derivatives trade volatility, not value.²⁹ Thus, disparities in price vanish and reappear with accelerating speed as they create opportunities for arbitrage, which derives gain from difference in space and time across markets. In the same way, while trade liberalization, low-cost air travel, and digital technologies have expanded labor mobility, disparities in wages derive profits from difference across borders. The extensive exploitation of migrant workers is not only an effect of the intensification of global production processes; it also reflects the cross-border demand for liquidity that is the hallmark of financialized capitalism.

Financial markets read the future like an oracle. The wealth they generate is both an effect and a source of insecurity, the desire for confidence before an uncertain future. “Simply

²⁹ “What is at stake in the circulation of capital today is not so much the exchange of equivalents as the universal transmutability of fluctuation. It is the event of turbulence itself that becomes tradable, even or indeed especially when its parameters of variation are unknowable.” Melinda Cooper, “Turbulent Worlds: Financial Markets and Environmental Crisis,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 27, nos. 2–3 (2010): 178.

put,’ explains Marieke de Goede, “if financial technologies and profit are premised on the provision of security, the commercial logic of the markets is to identify more and more insecurities to be hedged.”³⁰ With the commodification of risk, financial calculative models can convert any income stream into tradeable securities, transforming the debts of consumers into assets for investors.³¹ The consumer’s insecurity becomes the investor’s security. Yet the investor is also vulnerable to the margin of error—the uncertainty beyond risk—that cannot be calculated, the threat that cannot be hedged. It is this inevitable yet incalculable uncertainty—the contagion of capital flight, erratic weather, infectious disease—that is the downside risk distributed to the public in the form of austerity policies, fueling explosive politics that contribute to systemic instability, and therefore, further uncertainty. The wealth that circulates through capital markets in which long-term debts are traded as assets dwarfs the output from the earned income of the risk-bearers who depend on wages. This is not to say that these risk-bearers are outside the financial economy, or that they are not also risk-takers. We are all entangled insofar as every aspect of personal and social life can be capitalized.³² If globalization is the expanded spatialization of markets through the logistical technologies of supply chains, financialization is their temporalization through statistical technologies that manage collective expectations.

³⁰ Marieke De Goede, “Financial Security,” *Finance and Society* 3, no. 2 (2017): 164.

³¹ Paul Langley, *The Everyday Life of Global Finance: Savings and Borrowing in Anglo-America*. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008).

³² Andrew Leyshon and Nigel Thrift, “The Capitalization of Almost Everything: The Future of Finance and Capitalism,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 24, nos. 7–8 (2007): 97–115.

Double Securitization

When everyday life ground to a halt in March 2020, the President of the United States blamed the migrants. One journalist called it “the Covid-19 excuse.”³³ “We are at war with a foreign virus,” he announced from the Oval Office. Approaching a global health emergency as though it were a national security crisis, the Trump administration promptly sealed the southwestern border, ostensibly to prevent migrants from infecting the nation. A week later, he ordered an unprecedented sixty-day ban on admissions, “pausing immigration” to “protect the solvency of our healthcare system and provide relief to jobless Americans.”³⁴ Nevertheless, “essential workers” were necessary to keep the economy afloat. Therefore, while refugees, asylum seekers, and applicants for family reunification were blocked, agricultural workers were an exception: “If anything, we’re going to make it easier [for growers].” Excluded from relief during the lockdown, undocumented workers had no choice but to risk infection by showing up for work. Meanwhile, although the routine domestic enforcement of immigration law was temporarily suspended, hearings and deportations accelerated for people in detention, including children, spreading the disease to countries that had little capacity to combat the coronavirus.³⁵

³³ Eric Reidy, “The COVID-19 Excuse? How Migration Policies Are Hardening around the Globe,” *The New Humanitarian*, April 17, 2020.

³⁴ Molly O’Toole et al., “Trump Orders Suspension of Applications for Green Cards,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 22, 2020.

³⁵ In March 2020, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) recorded 17,965 removals. According to the Guatemalan government, ninety-five minors traveling without parents were deported from the United States, a departure from a previous policy according to which unaccompanied minors were allowed to remain in shelters operated by the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement pending asylum applications. Although most African countries had closed their borders to prevent Covid-19 outbreaks, ICE reported the deportations of 189 African nationals between March 1 and June 20, 2020, including twenty to the Democratic Republic of Congo and thirteen to Senegal. Juan Montes, “U.S. Fails to Prevent Deportation of Migrants Infected With Covid-19, Guatemalan Officials,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 24, 2020; Julia Preston, “Migrant Children Still Face Speedy Deportation Hearings in COVID-19 Hotspots,” *The Marshall Project*, April 10, 2020, <https://www.themarshallproject.org>; Joe Penney, “Despite Closed Borders, the US is still deporting Africans during the pandemic,” *Quartz Africa*, July 27, 2020.

Migration policy is generally understood in terms of a conflict between the interests of the state and the migrant. The state seeking to control its borders is asserting a right to political security as a fundamental feature of national sovereignty. The person seeking opportunity abroad, on the other hand, is asserting a right to human security that is not available in their country of origin. Thus, the political security of the state entails the human insecurity of the migrant, whereas the human security of the migrant entails the political insecurity of the state. Under globalization, however, a third form of security has come to dominate both the public decisions of the state and the private necessity of the individual. Global financial capital reproduces itself by securitizing assets—that is, by converting the market value of present wealth into instruments that protect it from future volatility. Financial securities ensure that material assets, such as real estate, natural resources, and machinery, can be liquidated into cash even when they cannot be sold on the market. This guarantee of liquidity has been a crucial mechanism for the global expansion of supply chains, both by providing collateral for credit and by encouraging speculative investments. In recent decades, the proliferation of financial capital has come to dwarf material assets, undermining the stability of the global economy. Because money follows risk, generating capital from volatility, the resulting human and political insecurity only reinforces the centrality of financial markets. In other words, financial security threatens the security of both the migrant and the state.

Benjamin argues that the state monopoly on violence is a necessary condition for the preservation of the law itself. This violence of law reveals itself whenever institutions lose the legitimacy to rule without threat. He raises the question of whether conflict can even be regulated without violence. Because legal contract between parties implies enforceability, “lawfare”—the

use of legal means for political and economic ends—indicates institutional deterioration.³⁶

Nonviolent agreement is only possible in spheres that are inaccessible to violence: the regulation of exchange through the language of trust. Under the modern rule of law, however, the threat of violence is what ensures compliance. This is why Benjamin finds fraud sanctions to be evidence of political decay. A state would prohibit fraud only when its fear of the reactive violence of the defrauded party interferes with its own imposition of authority. Strong states don't negotiate with individuals.

By this criterion, the U.S. was a weak state indeed when the government bought the private debt of the banks in 2008. The Troubled Asset Relief Program was a form of lawfare. By guaranteeing investors, the state performed an act of transparency that obscured its own structural complicity in the crisis, what Greta Krippner calls governance by appearance.³⁷ The separation of public and private spheres, foundational to liberal democracies, has been subsumed within a law of private contract that has become the defining feature of legitimacy for the financial state. Concurrently, development financing without political intervention indicates mitosis of the public sphere in China, a nominally communist state seeking lucrative outlets for excess capital. China and the U.S. occupy complementary positions within a global monetary system dedicated to the self-valorization of capital, and both are prepared to mobilize their considerable military and policing capacity to serve that objective.

³⁶ John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, *Ethnicity, Inc.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 56; and John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, "Reflections on the Anthropology of Law, Governance, and Sovereignty," in *Rules of Law and Laws of Ruling*, ed. Julia Eckert, Keebet von Benda Beckman and Franz von Benda Beckman (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2008).

³⁷ Greta R. Krippner, *Capitalizing on Crisis: The Political Origins of the Rise of Finance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

The Limits of Human Rights

Within the international community of nation-states, it is a sovereign prerogative to exclude noncitizens from recognition under the rule of law. The exception to this exception is the refugee or asylee who can successfully activate an international human right to protection from *non-refoulement*. Yet, as I have demonstrated, the uncertainty of this determination is not limited to the executive discretion of immigration law. While the right to appellate review in civil and criminal cases can correct for the excesses of a particular court, every case is ultimately a sovereign decision to be narratively rationalized in the textual form of an opinion.³⁸ In this regard, the impasse of migrant rights is not a problem of political will, but a structural contradiction of justice as law that becomes apparent as governments prioritize the cultivation and protection of financial markets. Governance processes must address demands for human, national, and financial security under conditions of intensifying economic, political, and environmental stress. The incompatibility of these demands appears as contagion—represented in popular and political media as disease, mass migration, police violence, crime, or financial panic. The fear of contagion motivates conflicting strategies that may exacerbate the problems they ostensibly address.

Because the state, the migrant, and the investor seek different forms of security, their interests cannot be balanced through compromise. In recent years, however, the financial logic of risk management has provided a common conceptual foundation for evaluating disparate security claims. Information technologies create a platform on which economic and political actors continually adjust their positions by assessing the potential impact of their decisions. Measuring expectations for the future rather than analyzing the lessons from the past, risk management

³⁸ David Gray Carlson, “The Traumatic Dimension in Law,” *Cardozo Law Review* 24 (2003): 2287.

techniques also create that platform by objectifying aggregate perceptions of risk. Thus, policy interventions are performative; they instantiate themselves as a source of security that generates its own threat.³⁹ If the platform is the social form adequate to finance capitalism, the migrant is its archetypal denizen, both subject of and subject to speculation, managing networks of investment and trust. Migrants are potent figurations of the preference for liquidity over profit insofar as employers demand liquid labor markets in order to demonstrate a future capacity for productivity. Migrant labor circulates like currency through global supply chains, fluctuating in value to employers and the state. Likewise, global governance processes, whatever their concerns with human security, generate data and negotiate biopolitical classifications that exclude or include migrant workers based on shifting perceptions of risk.

Double securitization enacts the limits of human rights as a categorical imperative. The structural necessity of the undeserving migrant within the system of sovereign states prevents even the steady supply of remittances—"securitization from below"—from institutionalizing migrant rights. Channeling value across boundaries of power, migrants serve a critical function within this system, yet this good must be misrecognized as evil for the system to function. Mirroring the diversity and diffusion of these human supply chains, the migrant rights movement tends towards diversity and inclusion rather than consolidating under a single mission. Some advocates have focused on the international diffusion of securitization through norms such as mandatory detention, temporary work regimes, and expedited return, while others have concentrated their efforts locally. However they direct their energies, they are participating in the transformation of the exception into the rule, which operates—under the title of “human rights”—as the self-evident rationale for resilience in a permanent state of emergency.

³⁹ Nina Boy, “Sovereign Safety,” *Security Dialogue* 46, no. 6 (2015): 530–47.

The human rights regime emerged after World War II as part of a utopian project to actualize the potential of human development through technological innovation and liberal freedom. Today, it is part of financialization's planetary platform for arbitraging and reproducing inequalities of risk. Accordingly, the United Nations has taken unprecedented steps in recent years to more fully integrate international migration within its field of operations.⁴⁰ This is not only because states are demanding a reserve army of tractable labor in competitive global markets; it is also because migrants embody risk in late capitalism. Fears of racial contamination and disease narrate the anxiety generated by that risk. The association of unauthorized migration with terrorism is animated by the same contagion of affect that supports popular wars securing proprietary claims to natural resources abroad. In this respect, the disposal of migrant lives parallels the propensity of certain states to extract value by murdering their own people.⁴¹

What Achille Mbembe calls "necropolitics" is not an Afropessimist anomaly; it is the violence that Benjamin critiques as intrinsic to policing. When Moussa was imprisoned and beaten, like when Sidiki was deported and Jemma's motherhood was put on trial, their "mere life" was not an accident of the law but constitutive of it. Both the example of the deserving migrant and its exception are rationalized as fetish figures within a national narrative of

⁴⁰ Impelled by a massive influx of migrants into Europe in 2015, the United Nations directed member states to negotiate a "global compact" for "safe, orderly and regular migration involving full respect for human rights and the humane treatment of migrants, regardless of migration status." United Nations General Assembly, *New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants*, Resolution adopted 3 October 2016, para. 21. This process was initiated by the UN General Assembly, an institution created to facilitate normative commitments among states. However, the negotiation of a soft law "compact" demonstrated the same preoccupation with flexibility and control that has characterized the institutionalization of global finance. See Evalyn Tennant and Christian Wolff, "Civil Society and the Struggle for a Rights-based Global Compact," *Global Social Policy* 18, no. 3 (2019), 343–48; Lisa M Simeone and Nicola Piper, "From Rights to Risk: Labour Migration and the Securitization of Justice," in *Handbook of Migration and Global Justice*, ed. L. Weber and C. Tazreiter (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2021); and Chris Brummer, *Minilateralism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

⁴¹ Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

compliance with the ends of moral law. The illusion of the legal interpretation is the explanatory repression of a contingency that is intrinsic to—and absorbed by—every decision. In semiotic terms, the metapragmatic gesture of human rights dissimulates an asymmetry of power by ritually encompassing the token as a type within a moral relationship without the possibility of reciprocity. In this regard, humanitarianism is the objective sociological existence of good intentions, whether or not they are subjectively experienced by the parties involved. It instantiates hierarchy by granting a free gift, which always has its costs.

The Trauma Trap of History

I have argued that the experience of migration can persist like a trauma, an event of psychic violence that must be forgotten yet appears as a symptom. Many of my informants left Africa or Europe for the United States in an attempt to escape the postcolonial opposition of the civilizing mission. Yet as Manthia Diawara notes with irony, the eloquence of their outrage was matched by their identification with *la francophonie*; their criticism of the past was often articulated from the position of a participant in French history rather than an outsider. In the United States, these migrants encounter a parallel pattern of racialization that presents a new frame of self-reference. The adjustment to American racism expands the scale of diasporic cross-fertilization indexing a common genealogy of transatlantic slavery.⁴² This network of Atlantic Africans, spanning four continents, reinforces a moral claim to extra-national presence for migrants whose history has been overdetermined for centuries by Europe and the Americas. Diawara, for example, attributes his love affair with the U.S. to an adolescent rebellion that was sparked by his discovery of rock-and-roll. Amina was inspired by the independent women of

⁴² Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995). On self-reference and the expansion of scale, see my discussions in the Introduction and Chapter 3.

means that she saw in American movies. Stéphane wanted to be at the cutting edge of information science and modern art. Narcisse wanted to perform a queer identity without fear. Hardly outrageous aspirations, these are the possibilities of modernity conditioned by the arbitrage of migration. Rather than gifts of civilization, they are counter-gifts within a longstanding relationship in which the original sacrifice is African.

Sacrifice is a contranym. On one hand, it indicates the original gift that initiates the economy of delayed exchange described by Mauss. On the other, it indicates the violence that cuts the network in order to enact a boundary, instantiating the integrity of a group through exclusion as described by Girard. Like the dialectic between the lord and bondsman described by Hegel, colonial powers enacted the ambivalence of sacrifice: they demanded that Africans submit as the cost of survival, and then they accepted that submission as the gift appropriate to a feudal relationship of moral superiority. Because time destabilizes any opposition, Hegel's bondsman internalizes the lord's power through work.⁴³ Fanon, like Marx, anticipated that this self-referential moment would ignite a decisive break of collective self-determination. "All the degrading and infantilizing structures that habitually infest relations between the colonizer and the colonized were suddenly liquidated," he wrote of the Algerian Revolution.

Whereas the colonized usually has only a choice between a retraction of his being and a frenzied attempt at identification with the colonizer, the Algerian has brought into existence a new, positive, efficient personality, whose richness is provided less by the trial of strength that he engages in than by his certainty that he embodies a decisive moment of the national consciousness.⁴⁴

Sadly, with or without violent revolution, postcolonial Africans did not experience such closure.

⁴³ G. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2979), 111–19 (para. 178-196).

⁴⁴ Frantz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution: Political Essays*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1964), 102–103.

With each transition, infrastructures of resource distribution and mutual understanding were fractured and reconstituted through practices of mutual commitment and renunciation, storytelling and forgetting, innovation and imitation. However voluntary their intentions, each of my informants were marked by political struggles in their countries of origin over the rules and processes that should govern social life.

This work of cutting and connection continues within migrant communities, where personal decisions bring into question the adequacy of identity and the determinacy of the good. As Robert Meister and Didier Fassin point out, gratitude for the gift of legal recognition demands a counter-gift of psychological recovery from the trauma of the past. Reconciliation implies new repressions: the disavowal of agency, the perpetuation of inequality.⁴⁵ Yet the impossibility of such closure is the main message of an immigrant admissions process that appears biased or random. In case-by-case determinations that allocate scarce visas based on the impact of injury, indications of agency can undermine the credibility of an applicant as a target of sympathy. For this reason, supplicants for the humanitarian grace of the state must not only produce narratives that document their trauma; they must also reenact that trauma as a skilled improvisation in the ritual context of the courtroom. This is not theatre because its outcomes are contingent on the migrant's performance. The demand for authenticity requires both a categorical claim, a recognized form of group persecution, and its particular demonstration, the repetition of pain that has been repressed. Thus, asylum adjudications stipulate the personhood of the bourgeois subject who owns personal trauma on the basis of a collective identification that is generalizable but not relational. This reframing of social membership as an aggregation of individuals may be the most

⁴⁵ Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Robert Meister, *After Evil* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

traumatic dimension of all for people who understand themselves as dividentally inseparable from others.

As with human rights law, trauma represents an absolute truth that has efficacy as a fetish within the moral economy that it constitutes. These concrete abstractions are applied through practices—by activists, therapists, lawyers, and by migrants themselves—that constitute nothing other than the knowledge of praxis.⁴⁶ While Descartes’s attestation of self-reference—“I think, therefore I am”—constituted a secular subject who obeys the dictates of reason, the self-reference of fetishizing consciousness constitutes a feeling subject by converting the theological unconscious into a token of belief in the truth of intuition. Marx demonstrated how this dialectic of theory and practice has powered the spread of capitalism and its ideology of modernity. Among the many fetishes that this ideology engenders is the memory of the past as the truth of the present. This trauma trap of history is a backward fixation, captured by Benjamin’s description of Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus*, that distracts us from the trauma of the future.

Network Security as Knowing Practice

“You know that America you see on TV back at home?” Sylvie joked. “That’s right where it stays, on that TV back home.” Sylvie wasn’t planning to return to Africa anytime soon. Yet there was a way in which she was still there: in the images that her family saw on television and in the *hau* of her gifts. Whether her emigration was a gift from God or the U.S. government, she was duty-bound to keep passing on the little she had. “Even Americans say that ‘what goes around comes around,’” she remarked after learning that idiom in her English class. She was surprised because like most of my informants, the ethos of redistribution was what made

⁴⁶ Karl Marx, “The Theses on Feurbach,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Richard Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978).

Africans different. Yet the dynamics of reciprocity cannot be reduced to a cultural value like “ubuntu,” a logic of utility maximization, or Bourdieu’s “social capital.” Whatever their moral referents, personal commitments exceed the logic of either gift or contract because their intentions are not transparent and their outcomes are not assured.

“It’s easier to be generous when you have nothing,” complains my good friend Demba.

Diawara shares this sentiment with a confession:

Every time I am ready to leave Bamako, I feel as if I am on the run. I begin to tire of the social roles expected of me, I run out of cash to give to relatives and friends, and I miss the cafés and the freedom my anonymity affords me in New York and Paris.⁴⁷

Migration creates distance from immersion in the dense sociality of an African life. This autonomy may be welcomed by intimates as an extension of the network or sanctioned as a rejection of moral standards. Diawara’s uncle judged his nephew severely for failing to exhibit *yere don*, the self-knowledge of pride in one’s lineage that is demonstrated by investing the fruits of success in the natal village.⁴⁸ Diawara argues passionately for the liberation of the African individual from the shackles of tradition. He found the conservatism of his elders to be even more stifling in the French diaspora, where the pressure of racism was experienced by many as a sense of inadequacy to the civilizing ideal. This description brought Cheik to my mind. Also a Malian of noble descent who was haunted by the myths of modernity, Cheik’s shame about the transgressions of his sons expressed the same mimetic violence that inspired the painting over his couch: a black woman in a hoop skirt with a child in a tweed suit and starched collar. A generation before Cheik, Diawara found relief in the leftist spirit of his times: “For me, the salvation of the African immigrants in France lay not in an ideology of *yere don* but in an

⁴⁷ Manthia Diawara, *We Won’t Budge: An African Exile in the World* (New York: Civitas Books, 2003), 1.

⁴⁸ Diawara, 171–200.

identification with the French working class, which embodied the ideals of the French Revolution.”⁴⁹ With his second emigration to the United States, Diawara cultivated a hybrid identity as the legacy of his colonial inheritance. He was a secular subject with the freedom to choose his own politics and system of beliefs.⁵⁰

Nevertheless, Diawara’s memoir is fraught with ambivalence about the sacrifices that he and others have made to make a place for themselves in an ill-fitting world. Forced or free, relations of credit and debt perform and counter-perform a *habitus* that channels resources into immediate projects without abandoning longer-term commitments. What my informants described as a “community” was not a function of geography, race, ethnicity or even the list of contacts that might be called a network. It was the instantiation of contingent links as potential claims and obligations. These chains of commitment had limits; privacy permitted the personal accumulation of capital and space for experimentation without interference. In my experience, however, absolute refusals were rare. Even Claude, Karim, Stéphane, and Marianne, who held strong opinions about the political violence in their countries, maintained relations that would cross frontlines of difference at home. In this respect, my informants resisted the narrative closure that would refute the viability of competing perspectives. They differed from Liisa Malkki’s Hutu informants, whose mytho-historical practice collectively relieved suffering by instantiating identity in exile.⁵¹ In the refugee camp, the outrage of having one’s story challenged may serve as the affective core of political struggle. However, this is a mode of self-programming that can backfire in diaspora, where mutual support is contingent on a common

⁴⁹ Diawara, 197.

⁵⁰ Diawara, 263–68. On the experience of racism in France, also see James Baldwin, “Every Goodbye Ain’t Gone,” in *Collected Essays*, ed. T. Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 773–83.

⁵¹ Liisa Malkki, *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology Among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

present. My informants found that they were not in control of their narratives. The pragmatics of tomorrow were continually inflected by the meta-pragmatics of today.

Practice acts on knowledge that is divided between the felt immediacy of faith in meaningfulness, and its justification by a belief in that meaning. The conviction of subjectivity, a political project, or God is not identical with the particular activity through which we perform our beliefs. This indeterminate relation is managed through ritual: a repetition of the past that makes a claim on the contingency of the near future. While belief may motivate and justify participation, the efficacy of a ritual requires real doubt as to its outcome. After all, if participants were absolutely certain of themselves, they would have no need to order their world. As Fischer Black put it provocatively to the American Finance Association, noise makes markets. It is what makes the activity of arbitrage possible, but also "keeps us from knowing what, if anything, we can do to make things better."⁵² Through ritual practice we perform a contradictory position of faith in doubt, facing into our denial by taking a *salto mortale* that is never guaranteed by our beliefs.

The same logic applies to relationships of good faith. This is the theological core of the question of justice as a practice rather than a transcendent ideal. How do we collectively create and sustain a *habitus* that has faith but does not believe in itself? This is the political question posed by the trauma of capitalism. Trauma is the psychic noise that disrupts our relations with the self and others. It is the abyss created by the loss of self-certainty. The only way ethics stay "real" is by simultaneously enacting faith and doubt. When it hardens into belief, it becomes a trap of repetition, both affectively and politically. Marianne describes her long-overdue struggle with memory in these terms:

⁵² Fischer Black, "Noise," *The Journal of Finance* 41, no. 3 (1986): 529.

I pretended everything was fine for thirty years. I got tenure, my kids went to college, and suddenly I couldn't sleep any more. It's not like I had any big revelations. I knew it all already. I just didn't want to remember. I got this PhD and I thought that was going to help me figure out why it happened, but I still don't understand it. I guess I just accepted that things aren't what they should be.

For Marianne, who lost her father and older brother to the 1972 massacre in Burundi, the only way out of the trauma trap was to accept that knowledge can never be certain without abandoning the practice of knowing by doing. This is the work of following through on intentions when we can't control their effects or even know what those effects are.

Notwithstanding the achievements of modern science, Hume's guillotine is with us still:

correlation is not causation. The relation between cause and effect is always an inference.⁵³

Doubting the strength of our convictions is an affective response to this insecurity of being, which both is and is not like unreliable memory or the desire that fades. In this sense, love is not desire. It is the persistence of ethical action that cannot be claimed as morality. As Gillian Rose puts it, the commitment of faith without absolute belief is when "mourning becomes law."⁵⁴

Love is what persists in the absence of desire or the certainty that what we are doing is just and true.

The Broken Middle

What is left of justice beyond trauma and retribution? Arendt hoped for a culture of civic engagement that would renew law as "the positively established fences which hedge in, protect, and limit the space in which freedom is not a concept, but a living, political reality."⁵⁵ Borders

⁵³ See my discussion of "Hume's Guillotine" in the Introduction and Chapter 2.

⁵⁴ Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes Law: Philosophy and Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); and *The Broken Middle* (Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 1992).

⁵⁵ Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968), 80–81.

would be nothing but the outer skin of political bodies in a pluralist ethos of communicative action.⁵⁶ Unfortunately, this liberal vision does not negate the specter of bare life; it merely represses it. The fence must violate freedom in order to instantiate it, elevating that “living, political reality” into an image of itself that justifies law-preserving violence. Policies are often evaluated in terms that validate the frameworks on which they are based. When outcomes do not meet expectations, the flaw is attributed to a model that must be revised. This process rarely acknowledges the unintended consequences of the framework itself, a concrete abstraction that structures the world by participating in it. Historical knowledge represents phenomena from a neutral position of exteriority, whereas information constituting financial markets performs those markets as fluctuations of message and noise. Failure is intrinsic to the market, not the model, because the actuality being constituted by the mimetic flow of information is indeterminate in space and time, and therefore always incomplete. Thus, political economy is a figure seen twice: both as an object of analysis and a medium of experience.

In an early essay, Immanuel Kant described the optical illusion of the figure seen twice as a “parallax.” Like a trick of the eye, the philosopher encounters an irreducible antinomy between subjective and objective standpoints that both limits and constitutes knowledge of the world.⁵⁷ The problem is not only that we cannot know the other. It is that we must “other” ourselves in order to generalize from experience. The paradox of self-reference forces us to skip the scale of

⁵⁶“The *polis*, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be.” Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 198.

⁵⁷ Immanuel Kant, “Dreams of a Visionary Explained by Dreams of Metaphysics,” in *The Philosophy of Kant*, trans. Carl J. Friedrich (New York: Modern Library, 1993). Also see Kojin Karatani, *Transcritique: On Kant and Marx* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003); and Slavoj Žižek, “The Parallax View,” *New Left Review* 25 (2004): 121–34.

perspective so that we can attribute legibility to the phenomena we observe. In so doing, we become aware of the contradiction between what is and what should be. When we leave this problem to God, our lived experience is infused with mystery.⁵⁸ Alternatively, we may become convinced that the knowledge we gather from this elevated position is the same as the things themselves. While the first approach may encourage fatalism, the second inspires false confidence in the power of perception to describe reality and solve its problems. Kant's ingenious solution to this problem was a critique that perches as the threshold between things and illusions, accounting for oneself while bracketing what cannot be perceived.

Kant had confidence in the power of informed judgment to banish contradiction. For even the most conscientious critic, however, what is not accounted for does not stay hidden. With the passage of time, every step one takes is different from the last. Deleuze notes that imitation is non-mediated difference, a likeness that does not correspond with an original. This is the "play-space" of mimesis that Benjamin considered the revolutionary potential of art in an age of mass reproduction.

The mime presents his subject as a semblance. One could also say that he plays his subject. Thus we encounter the polarity informing mimesis. In mimesis, tightly interfolded like cotyledons, slumber the two aspects of art: semblance and play.⁵⁹

Here semblance is an image and play is activity that both reproduces and diverges from that image. Although representations—the resemblance of semblance—index the image, they cannot capture an object that is in flux and therefore not identical with itself. Accepting this contradiction refuses a transcendental limit as the condition of possibility for a meaningful

⁵⁸ Ian Hacking, *The Emergence of Probability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

⁵⁹ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Reproducibility," in *Selected Writings, Volume 3* (1935-1938), trans. E. Jephcott et al., ed. H. Eiland and M.W. Jennings, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 127.

world. The possibility of conditions is also the impossibility of stasis, consistency, and absolute knowledge. The only ontological certainty is time, which brings change and death. Existence is a figure seen twice: both a ground for action and its negation.

The problem with justice is that the temptation to envision a better future fixes an objective that can strand the true believer in an inadequate present. Amina liked to say that the road to despair is paved with good intentions, yet Narcisse's resort to play is no solution. Barely distinct from the hegemonic forms that it imitates, mimicry becomes mimesis, which may in turn be expressed in art or law that kills the practice, like Mobutu's *authenticité*. This is why, as Judith Farquhar points out, pragmatic philosophies "seem to offer no resources for an absolutely correct ethics or an unimpeachable politics."⁶⁰ Because the value of any model is determined retroactively, its success is haunted by its virtual counter-performativity, the room for play that becomes a contrary interpretation of failed expectations. Accidents accumulate until the familiar becomes too strange for assimilation in the epistemic order, undermining confidence in the foundations of understanding. Arendt arrived at one such moment in Jerusalem when Adolph Eichmann claimed fidelity to Kant's categorical imperative. The banality of his evil was to adopt Hitler's law as his own: "Act in such a way that the Führer, if he knew your action, would approve it."⁶¹ Eichmann was acting freely as an agent of the Third Reich:

Those few who were still able to tell right from wrong went really only by their own judgments, and they did so freely; there were no rules to be abided by, under which the particular cases with which they were confronted could be subsumed. They had to decide each instance as it arose, because no rules existed for the unprecedented.⁶²

⁶⁰ Judith Farquhar, *A Way of Life: Things, Thought, and Action in Chinese Medicine* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020), 107.

⁶¹ Arendt cites from Hitler's legal code (*Die Technik des Staates*, 1942, 15-16) this distortion of the categorical imperative in the Critique of Practical Reason—that the will of the ethical subject must always be such that it can become the principle of general laws. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 136.

⁶² Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 295.

That Eichmann's crime was fidelity to a bad law puts him in the company of colonial governors, postcolonial dictators, and the District Attorney who sent Moussa to jail. Kant's practical reason reveals its truth in the court of history, when the individual subject can be judged from the standpoint of a more just future. In the meantime, critical scholars can only redouble their commitments, fighting the good fight in the hope that next time they will win. Yet they also perform their models in ways that may or may not serve their revolutionary dreams.⁶³

I have argued that the information economy of financialization is undermining the institutions of modernity, and with them the symbolic order that they maintained. This shift is evident in the spectacular irrationality of politics, sensational journalism, our microsocial adaptations to electronic media. Widespread indifference to scholarship has accompanied a paradigm shift to systems science, blurring the boundaries of information technology, engineering, medicine, and finance. Applied sciences increasingly rely on algorithms that process their own results as new data. In the fractal register of complex systems, the radical synchronism of recursive operations eliminates the reflexive standpoint of critique.⁶⁴ This trend is also apparent in the management of minds and bodies. Severed from the psychoanalytic tradition, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a set of psychotherapeutic techniques that approach trauma not as a truth to be confronted but as a pathology to be cured. As the successive disruptions of late capitalism produce anxiety on an unprecedented scale, the mental health industry has turned to "evidence-based" approaches that literally create their own evidence by

⁶³ See Hirokazu Miyazaki and Annelise Riles, "Failure as an Endpoint," in *Global Assemblages*, ed. Aihwa Ong and Stephen J. Collier (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2005).

measuring the internalization of stress.⁶⁵ The talking cure of psychoanalysis, which reconstitutes subjective self-control through narrative, is combined—and in some cases replaced—by pharmaceuticals and behavior modifications that encourage healing through practices of self-care. If “the body keeps the score,” as psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk has put it, then the focus of intervention is not a knowing subject but a feeling self who is both distinct and continuous with the environment.⁶⁶

Though many refugees undergo at least minimal therapy as part of the resettlement process, my informants rarely talked about their encounters with the mental health system. Cecilia Brickman has argued that the psychoanalytic model of the developmental psyche replicates the civilization narrative that justified colonialism. With the Enlightenment, she writes, “Belief in and worship of supernatural figures were evidence of inferior and unhealthy psychological tendencies.”⁶⁷ Stepping outside that evolutionary narrative means taking seriously other ways of “making up people,” as Ian Hacking puts it.⁶⁸ While my informants talked about substance abuse, depression, disassociation, and unpredictable violence, these problems were often couched in a worldview that explained psychic struggle in supernatural terms. The talk was usually about others yet often seemed like confession; spiritual disorder affecting one member of a group endangered them all. When Amina and Cheik were living together in Chicago, she consulted her imam repeatedly about his abusive behavior before she finally took out an order of

⁶⁵ Shefner, “Where is the Evidence for ‘Evidence-Based’ Therapy?” *Psychiatric Clinics of North America* 41 (2018): 319–29.

⁶⁶ Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015).

⁶⁷ Cecilia Brickman, *Race in Psychoanalysis: Aboriginal Populations in the Mind* (London: Routledge, 2018).

⁶⁸ Ian Hacking, “Making Up People,” *London Review of Books* 28, no. 6 (2006). See also Ivan Crozier, “Making Up Koro: Multiplicity, Psychiatry, Culture, and Penis-Shrinking Anxieties,” *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 67, no. 1 (2012): 36–70.

protection against him. Cheik's behavior changed for the better when he was required to see a therapist, at least until he decided to escape the situation by returning to New York. "Most of the Africans I know who get therapy are like Cheik," Amina told me. "They're forced to go because they got a DUI or let their temper get out of control the way they would at home."

CBT is often criticized as the commodification of mental health: a superficial reprogramming technique that became popular just as neoliberal institutions were rejecting costly, long-term investments in social well-being. Yet African men were more likely to respond to the behavioral pragmatics of anger management than to analysis. Over the course of her ordeal with the criminal justice system, Amina found therapy to be a critical resource for her family. In fact, she decided to become a therapist herself. "They don't want to talk about their problems with some expert," she told me. "But they'll follow directions like go out and take a walk when they're mad or even go to an AA meeting and listen to somebody else. I say, whatever works." Marianne, who coordinated a program for refugee girls from DRC, agreed that the more brutal their experiences, the more resistant Africans are to the idea of trauma. "I was that way, and so was everyone in my family," she told me. "We just wanted to get on with our lives." She found that the girls responded better to physical tasks such as art projects and dance classes than conversations in which they were asked to express their feelings. At the same time, Marianne did not expect these comforting distractions to restore meaning to their lives. There is no guarantee that narrative will perform its truth effect, yet the disavowal that negates representation sets the stage for the repetition of bad history. Trauma is a figure seen twice: both a broken past that can be patched with a story and the fear of what's to come that breaks up the ground of the present.

We all have our models, generally speaking: templates that we keep before us as we judge our unfolding lives. What kind of gift is a text like this, which takes more than it gives?

Derrida asks this question of Mauss, who is unable to keep the constative mode of science separate from a normative bias that sides with the gift over gold. “A treatise on the gift must and can only be part or party in the field it describes, analyzes, defines,” Derrida concludes. “He is first of all and from the first indebted.”⁶⁹ The models governing my approach to this research have changed many times since I began this project. When I look back at my writing, I don’t know if I will be pleased with the decisions I have made because I will have changed, as will the text and its many points of reference. Nevertheless, I will remain indebted. At a Fulani village in what is now Burkina Faso, Paul Riesman discovered that “freedom in society is founded on the possibility of each person’s entering into a direct relation with the bush, that is nature, without the mediation of another person or of any social institution.”⁷⁰ Migrants and ethnographers know that freedom; it is the abyss that we bridge every time we enter a world we don’t know and trust our intuitions, for better or for worse. Just because we can tell a good story doesn’t mean we understand what happened. An ethnography of arbitrage acknowledges its own failure to know as it performs—and counter-performs—its work of familiarization and estrangement.

My informants often told me they were too busy living to concern themselves with forces they could not control. Nevertheless, it appeared to me that some of them interpreted events as evidence of what they already believed, while others found themselves irrevocably changed by migration. Models are true as long as they work and their side effects can be ignored. While Bintu, Khalifa, and Pastor Nkara drew strength from tradition, Martine and Olivia tested varieties of religious experience. While Sylvie’s storytelling recaptured a trace of grace and Claude preserved the commitments of his youth, they both acknowledged the dissonance between theory

⁶⁹ Derrida, *Given Time* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 62.

⁷⁰ Paul Riesman, *Freedom in Fulani Social Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 257.

and praxis with their ambivalent *nsako*. Jean-Paul paid too high a price for his vision, yet had he survived, his sacrifices might have seemed worthwhile. Stéphane found himself on the upside of the recession, yet counter-performatively estranged, perhaps, from those who were not so lucky. Karim was on the downside, but foreclosure was a momentary setback in a career that made profits from risk. Narcisse's mimicry entailed an ironic detachment from nostalgia; Amina extended her debts to accommodate unknown others. They hedged trust, risked decisions, and suspended judgments that would foreclose the future. Struggling to meet our payments and keep our homes, we adjusted our expectations as we followed the money, just like the money that follows the risk. The recession became a rough patch that would be eclipsed soon enough by a global pandemic. As I write this, both Amina and Claude face life-threatening illnesses that are in no small part related to the stress of making do in the promised land.

“When the past speaks it always speaks as an oracle.” wrote Nietzsche. “Only if you are an architect of the future and know the present will you understand it.”⁷¹ But how can you know the present? Where the past and the future meet in the broken middle of everyday life, it is usually too late or too soon to do what's right. And yet that is what we must do. There is no integration without exception because coherence requires an outside, a before and after or a negative space that contains the whole. However, we integrate our lives by exception when we occupy the liminal state of collective uncertainty. Instead of foisting our risks on others, we might accept them as the reality of a common existence we cannot escape, a debt to future as well as past generations. Finance teaches us that the account is never balanced. We will not be saved, nor will we achieve equilibrium or clarity, yet we are still responsible for the gifts we have taken. As climate change confronts us as a species, repeating crises of racial difference

⁷¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 94.

iterate trauma that can no longer be repressed. We attempt to repair the ties that bind through ritual performances and knowing practices that test our capacity to subsist, beyond capitalism, with all life on earth.

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