The Fixer

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INTRODUCTION

Business of Dreams

His office is a hole-in-the-wall on a sandy street in a ragged neighborhood of Lomé. His seesaw limp, from a road accident during a business trip to northern Togo, defines his gait—"a risk of the trade," he calls it. But his face bristles with intensity and warmth, and his imposing intellect trumps all. Inside that hole-in-the-wall—his "bureau," he calls it—Kodjo operates a global business that would make a venture capitalist proud.

His métier is helping compatriots get visas to live and work in the US by applying for the Diversity Visa (DV) Lottery. This visa system, created by Congress in the mid-1990s (and made infamous by President Donald Trump in January 2018), is available to those from underrepresented countries and annually distributes fifty thousand visas to winners selected in a May raffle from up to 20 million applicants worldwide. More than 100,000 Togolese, sometimes up to a million, apply each year because they feel life at home is no longer tenable and the US, as a civil servant recently told me, is

"le pays de nos rêves" (the country of our dreams). Kodjo's business is premised on that precarious condition and the fantasy of a dreamy elsewhere.

Clients drift in and out of his office all day—seeking advice about their documents, soliciting help in financing their global ventures, discussing strategy for the embassy interview. Since many are operating what the State Department considers a ruse—they marry to get the visa, not for love, but need to convince the embassy otherwise—Kodjo's work is also affective. He has to convince clients to inhabit an assumed identity with conviction and unblinkingly perform marital attachment during the embassy interview.

A young couple enters and the woman informs Kodjo that she's been sleeping with her confirmation number under her pillow at night. "I'm sure we won this time. I can feel it," she exudes. She leaves for the "cyber" next door, her partner in tow, to log on to the State Department website to see whether or not they've been selected this year. Thirty minutes later, they return, the woman in tears. "I was certain we'd won this time, I saw it in my prayers." Her partner is more sanguine, shrugging and adding, "There's always next year." Trademark Togolese hopefulness in the face of crushing defeat.

Throughout the day, TV-5, live from Paris and captured by satellite, chatters on a flat screen on the wall beside Kodjo's desk. He follows French news and talk shows with a passion, especially the debates, the hardball-style back-and-forth about politics and contemporary issues.

A boyhood friend of Kodjo's, just in from Germany, shakes hands all around. "When will your container arrive?" someone asks. "I didn't send one this time," Mawuli replies. "Go back to Germany then. What good are you here?" When the laughter subsides, Mawuli is quick with the comeback—repartee is the currency of the street—"The next one will be a double container, and you'll be eating your words—and left out of the spoils."[1] Like many expats, Mawuli wishes he could return to Togo for good—he left for Germany ten years ago and misses the food, the camaraderie, the language—but how to make a living in Togo? By what means would he support his family? He contents himself for now with an annual month-long visit.

Another couple greets Kodjo in Ewe, asking to see him in private. When they finish, they file out quietly, seeming anxious. "They have their embassy interview tomorrow, and they had a few last-minute questions," Kodjo says. So many young couples, all in their early twenties. This because Kodjo primarily signs up university students—to meet the State Department requirement that successful DV applicants have a high school diploma (or

a job on the US Labor Department's "Jobs Needed" list, which is virtually impossible for Togolese).

A poignant irony of Kodjo's trade is that while most of his clients get visas, he himself has repeatedly failed. He's applied for the lottery every year since the mid-1990s without being chosen, and he's married three female winners but each time something has gone awry during the embassy interview. His own failure, however, has produced dramatic business success. While apprenticing his first wife in a trade that was accepted by the State Department and grooming her for the embassy interview, he learned the ins and outs of the visa lottery system—not only how to fill out the required documents but also the art of self-presentation—and began to offer advice to lottery winners. As his reputation grew he decided to enter the business, first enlisting people for the lottery (now over a thousand a year), then shepherding the winners' files through the process. Having lived the fantasy himself, he was the perfect impresario, and today he is Lomé's gold standard among visa lottery brokers.

BY WORLD BANK STANDARDS, Togo is one of the poorest countries in the world, located at the heart of the world's poorest region. As much as 65 percent of the country remains in agriculture, which is sustainable dur-

ing normal years but is all too vulnerable to poor rains and drought. Aside from a small but wealthy political elite, the rest of the country subsists on the informal or parallel economy, hustling to make ends meet by selling on the streets soap, matches, single cigarettes, used car parts, and a dizzying array of small food items. These ambulant vendors turn over the tiniest of margins, at best hoping for a small profit by the end of each day.

Salaried workers are only mildly better off. An acquaintance, a recent graduate of Lomé's national university, makes $120 a month as a personnel and accounting officer at a medical clinic. While his wage is considered passing, his work is constantly sand-bagged by superiors who pocket most of the earnings from each medical procedure they perform, leaving the clinic in the red—and this anxious accountant grasping for air. They cover their tracks by accusing *him* of having pocketed the missing money, a tactic that has so discouraged him that he's desperately been looking elsewhere for work but, months later, still hasn't found any.

Consider the pay scale of those fortunate enough to make a wage in Lomé. A low-level day laborer—a security guard or chauffeur—makes 25,000–30,000 CFA francs ($50–60) a month.[2] A starting salary for a civil servant (who works in one of the ministries or in the small private sector or for an NGO) is 65,000 CFA francs ($130) per month. If all goes well—if he or she continues to climb, doesn't alienate people, and can stick it out for two decades—that same civil servant may top out at 230,000 CFA francs ($460) a month. Now consider the differences between Togo and the US: in the States, a scrub worker making minimum wage takes home in a single week what a midcareer Togolese civil servant makes in a month. No wonder many are tempted to dip into public monies—or to leave for greener pastures elsewhere.

People's sense of living precariously in Togo is not only economic. Five decades of single-family rule—whose raison d'être seems little other than pocketing the nation's meager resources for personal use—has deflated the hopes of all but those who profit therefrom. Reminders of this small but wealthy political elite are visible everywhere—in the expensive cars they drive, in the "villas" they build on the outskirts of Lomé. Every election gives momentary hope—that things might change, that the ruling party may finally be voted out—but when the status quo is restored (often due to massive fraud), disappointment and loss of hope set in all over again.

It is this precarious existence—loss of hope in the economy and in

politics—that leads people to want to leave and to apply for the DV lottery. How, especially for young men, to achieve social adulthood at home—an adulthood predicated on having a job, on being able to marry and provide for a family? As one put it, "If I can't even afford *la dot* [the marriage gifts], how will I ever take care of a family?" For young women, because of the dearth of men their age with means, they often look for an older man, usually married, who will provide for them. This of course removes them from or delays their entry into the matrimonial market. In short, how to achieve, on both sides of the gender divide, one's social projects at home?

The visa lottery phenomenon is at once a response to the unending moment of crisis, providing an exit—and a reason why so many want to leave—while also mirroring all that typifies the moment itself: the identity plays and confidence tricks that the crisis brings into being.

ON THE STREETS OF LOMÉ, he's called a *traiteur*, someone who "treats" files. In Ghana they refer to brokers like Kodjo as "connection men." The US embassy calls him a "fixer."

While his business (getting US visas for Togolese) may be unusual, he's nevertheless paradigmatic of a certain West African savoir faire in this postcolonial moment—of someone who can hustle, who has connections, who can obtain documents for any need, who can get done whatever has to get done in order to get by and make a living, and do it all quickly (Alpes 2016). Being in the business of fulfilling people's fantasies of travel, of course, gives him additional cachet on the street.

Much of Kodjo's work involves registering people for the DV through the online system, then helping winners meet the deadlines leading up to the embassy interview. The rub in the system is the cost: $330 for the embassy interview in 2017 (until 2012, it was $819), $220 for the medical exam, $200 to obtain the necessary documents (birth certificate, passport, high school transcript, criminal record), another $1,000 for the plane ticket. And this for only one person. If married with children, it's $2,000 per family member—with all this (except airfare) in hand before the interview and before an applicant knows whether he or she will get the visa.

If winners are not able to raise the money on their own—and few Togolese are, even salaried civil servants—they often choose to exploit a loophole in the DV system that allows winners to add a spouse after they've ap-

plied (but before the interview) by arranging a marriage with someone with means who is willing to bankroll the couple's interview costs and plane ticket, as well as Kodjo's service fee.

The embassy of course looks down on such marriages—which seem expedient, not "real"—and spends time during the visa interview trying to ferret out real from fake. In 2005, sensing that an inordinate amount of gaming was going on—adding to winners' files spouses and sometimes children who were not real—the consulate created a "fraud unit," hiring two Togolese to assist the consuls in deciding whether marriages were legitimate by combing the city's neighborhoods and marriage registers. These fraud officers made a habit of showing up at an applicant's apartment after hours, insisting on a supplementary meeting at a neighborhood drinking hole, or dropping by a workplace to interrogate the applicant's *patron*.

Because it is often fixers like Kodjo who arrange these marriages—with those with means in the diaspora who want to bring over a sister or a wife, or with wealthy *douaniers* (customs agents) or government ministers who want to send a son or daughter to the States—the embassy doesn't look kindly on them. Indeed, consuls often view fixers as the root of the problem, pushing others to engage in what they deem fraudulent activity for their own profit. Twice the US embassy has gone after Kodjo, the first time getting the police to raid his office and confiscate his files, the second sending him to prison in Ouagadougou for three months.

THIS BOOK EXPLORES the cat-and-mouse game between street and embassy, situating it within the post–Cold War conjuncture of ongoing crisis, of an eviscerated though still dictatorial state, of the emptiness of citizenship under such conditions, of a sprawling transnational diaspora and the desires and longings it creates, of informationalism and its new technologies, of surveillance regimes and their travails.

My account focuses on this repartee at the border not only to illustrate the savvy of the street in the face of embassy gatekeeping but also to interrogate the awkward, culturally saturated (and, needless to say, highly unequal) nature of the encounter between visa seeker and border agent. In this rarefied embassy space, consuls make decisions about individual lives (and national futures) by applying cultural norms—about identity, about marriages "real" and "fake," about affect and honesty—that are often at odds with local categories and stray wide of their mandate. If you were dishonest

on your application or during the embassy interview, you will be found unworthy of a visa. If your dossier claims a spouse or child who is not yours, your chances are similarly slim. If you look away when responding to a consul query or fumble a question about the color of the curtains in your bedroom or the side of the bed you sleep on (when such parsing of the mattress may not be normative in your social world), you are also likely to be denied. To wit, judgments about moral personhood—especially whether you are a truth-teller, whatever that might mean—often supersede all others in deciding individual and collective futures.

These border games are symptomatic of our times, not only in West Africa but beyond as well (De Genova and Peutz 2010; Feldman and Ticktin 2010; Alpes 2011, 2016; Fassin 2011; Freeman 2011; Ticktin 2011; Cole and Groes 2016; Kleist and Thorson 2017). Their antics condense the experience of millions of migrant-refugees today whose lives are devoted to getting documents (a visa or residency permit, a "blue" passport) that will enable them to travel to and reside in destination countries to which they are fleeing or have fled after enduring often-Herculean ordeals to get there. By most accounts, the plight and travail of the refugee-migrant today is *the* political issue of our time.

PARSING AFRICAN MIGRATION

The photographs rivet the imagination—streams of migrants crossing the Sahara, refugees wandering the European countryside, wooden boats transporting human sardines across the turbulent Mediterranean, African bodies washed up on European and North African shores. While such images in today's leading newspapers distort—because they are partial and overly dramatic—our understanding of the larger migrant-refugee story,[3] they nevertheless index some of the enormity and tragic urgency of the phenomenon. Consider these astonishing figures: Up to 300,000 West and Central Africans have crossed the Mediterranean each year since 2000, with 30,000 deaths along the way, most at sea.[4] During the same period, African migrants have spent €16 billion trying to get to Europe, while EU countries have spent €20 billion on border control and deportations. Now compare the number of West Africans leaving today to those 12 million who departed the continent during the Atlantic slave trade: today's yearly departures are three times those of any year during the Atlantic slave trade and when projected forward would surpass in 50 years that trade's 350-year total.[5]

The canvas on which this contemporary human drama is written is vast. Villages and towns throughout West Africa are now tied to destination cities in Europe and the US (and increasingly East Asia), with cell phone, social media, Skype, and remittance traffic between these termini swelling by the week. Entire commercial and infrastructural networks, towns even, have emerged in the Sahara, across North Africa, and in southern Europe to serve the needs of those in transit, while tens of thousands remain stranded along the way (for want of money, because they found a job worth keeping, because they retreated when faced with a death march into the desert). It is not surprising that new security regimes have transformed the coasts of southern Europe, with border control outsourced to African countries, thereby extending European frontiers into North and West Africa. Today the world's largest desert, vast areas of North Africa and the Mediterranean, and indeed much of Europe have been forever changed by this massive movement of population—what Stephen Smith (2018) refers to as Africa's "Scramble for Europe" and Achille Mbembe (2017, 6), in a different register, the "Becoming Black of the world."

The US is a preferred destination for many in West Africa because its economy remains robust and its racism is, according to some, less pronounced than Europe's, but it is less accessible. East Asia and Eastern Europe, too, are desirable destinations. A young Togolese man I know, smitten with migration fever, first had designs on China (a friend got him a business visa, but it took my acquaintance so long to raise the money for his ticket that when he arrived at China's doorstep he was told his visa had just expired). Then he met a German woman who promised to bring him to Europe, but their romance fell through. Next Canada, an opportunity to farm, which never panned out. Then Romania, a degree in nursing. Along the way, he traveled to Mali to tempt the Sahara but, after listening to the stories, decided against it. Finally, back in Lomé, a terrible accident that crushed one of his hands and left him with a serious bone infection enabled him to get a medical visa to the US. "The happiest day of my life," he announced. Departure at any cost, it would seem. This imagined itinerary is far from exceptional among today's West African youth, not only demonstrating the manner in which the world is now inserted into local fantasy and aspiration but also evidencing an irrepressible energy of spirit for travel and exile.

Scholarship, much of it by anthropologists, has rushed to document this pressing human story.[6] There is cutting edge research on each link in the migration chain—on the precariousness of life in West Africa and the fan-

tasy of an elsewhere, on transit zones and the high-risk journey between home and metropole, on the fraught lives of migrants and refugees at their points of destination, on those who return home to West Africa as deportees or (occasionally) of their own volition.[7] There is also brilliant scholarly work on borders and border control, deportation regimes, and biometric or "algorithmic" citizenship and the profiling it enables; on the "paradox" that while more want to migrate than ever before—for many in West and Central Africa migration has become a necessity and an inevitability—fewer are able; on the manner in which sovereignty and (im)mobility have become entangled and co-constitutive in a post-9/11 world; on the way in which security has replaced freedom as core metropolitan value; on the temporalities of migrant experience; on the existential migrant; on the entanglement of money and attachment—and the remaking of kinship and culture—across borders.[8]

My own contribution to this burgeoning list focuses on a quirky and idiosyncratic aspect of the immigration puzzle—the US DV Lottery—which nevertheless offers a special vantage from the margins while sharing many features with migrant-refugee experience more broadly: migrant desire in the face of precarity at home, migrant savvy in crossing borders despite ever more aggressive measures to keep them out, the disappointments (and pleasures) of migrant-refugee experience abroad. Moreover, my work on the DV provides a close-up portrait of the figure of the intermediary—the visa broker, the "connection man," the "fixer"—who lies at the heart of much of the West African migration story today (Alpes 2016; Goodman 2016; Lucht 2017; Richter 2018). It also offers a sustained look at those border games and performances that enable potential migrants to get by embassy gatekeepers and obtain visas (Ticktin 2006; Obadare and Adebanwi 2010; Cabot 2013; Alpes 2016; Drotbohm 2017), often by assuming identities not their own—a type of "passing" with a long genealogy in Atlantic African worlds (Davidson 2006). Finally, this research, rare among those who work on migration (but see Lucht 2011; J. Cole 2014a; Alpes 2016; Besteman 2016; Faranak 2016; Feldman-Savelsberg 2016; Kleinman 2016), encompasses the antipodes of this transnational story. I have followed clients of Kodjo's from Lomé to Newark, Raleigh, Omaha, and Moline, and I have learned things about back home, and vice versa, that I would not have known otherwise.

THE STRANGE HISTORY OF THE DV

The DV program[9] was conceived by Congress in the late 1980s in an attempt to redress unintended consequences of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act. It became law as part of an omnibus immigration bill in 1990 and was implemented in its present form in 1995. The DV's history, and that of the 1965 Act, is one of unforeseen outcomes (Law 2002) and unexpected appropriations—a history in which postcolonial theorists would find delight and recognize an instance of metropolitan intention being diverted by Global South interest, twice over.[10]

The landmark 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act sought to move away from race, ethnicity, and national origin as criteria in determining eligibility to migrate to the US, criteria that favored Western European immigrants while discriminating against and even barring from immigration those from non-European, especially Asian, countries (Goodman 2016, 4, 26). In place of national origins, the 1965 Act substituted a seven-category preference system, with family reunification and work skills as the most salient criteria (Jacob 1992, 302; Hethmon 2003, 391; Law 2002, 4; Goodman 2016, 26). Thus aspiring immigrants with family members already in the US,[11] or with work skills that did not take jobs from US workers, were eligible to petition for immigrant status.

Unforeseen by the authors of the 1965 Act, who assumed that the reforms would continue to favor immigrants of Western European origin, the new immigration law led to an explosion of Asian and Latin American applicants, primarily Chinese and Mexican, who more easily fit the criteria of family reunification and employment preference than those from other regions. By 1975, immigrants from Asia and Latin America accounted for two-thirds of all new arrivals in the US—over 500,000 a year (Law 2002, 5; Goodman 2016, 36).[12]

Among those disadvantaged by the 1965 Act were Western Europeans, especially Irish—one of the early "seed immigrant" populations in the US (Law 2002, 13). While many Irish attempted to migrate to the US during the 1980s because of worsening economic conditions at home, they were unable to because they had only distant relatives in the States and few had the work skills to qualify through the employment option.[13] However, sweet serendipity, there was at that time a felicitous convergence between immigrant desire and Congressional will, thanks to the presence of a critical mass of powerful, Irish-descended members of Congress—among them Ted Ken-

nedy, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Tip O'Neill, Brian Donnelly, and Bruce Morrison.[14] These Congressional titans and policy entrepreneurs (Law 2002) rallied to the cause of their compatriots by proposing that a "diversity" category be added to the 1990 Immigration Act in order to accommodate those countries that had been "adversely affected" by the 1965 reforms and were now "under-represented" in immigrant flows to the US (Jacob 1992, 299; Law 2002, 9–14; Hethmon 2003, 388–89; Goodman 2016, 27–80).

Of course, it would have been scandalous to create an immigration category for the members of a single nationality alone—although during the transitional phase of the diversity program (1990–1994) 40 percent of the slots *were* set aside for the Irish (Law 2002, 18; Newton 2005, 1053)—so the architects of the DV pitched their tent more broadly to include other underrepresented countries. To do so, they generated a formula that divides the world into six regions, allotting more visas to low-admission areas such as Europe and Africa, and fewer visas to high-admission ones such as Asia and Latin America (Newton 2005, 1054–55), while excluding those countries with already high immigrant flows to the US (Law 2002, 18–19; Hethmon 2003, 390).[15] Those who have written about this period in the history of the DV have suggested, surely correctly, that the entire system—the invention of the diversity category, its global reach, the formula for determining eligible countries, the seeming neutrality of the formula's application—was an alibi for the creation of an immigration portal for the Irish and represented US pork-barrel politics at its purest (Jacob 1992; Law 2002, 13–14; Miller 2017).[16]

Many of the DV's enduring features were established at the moment of its inception: the requirement that a successful winner have a high school diploma or two years of work experience in a trade on the Labor Department's list of needed jobs, the annual capping of diversity visas at fifty thousand, the removal of countries from the eligible list after they had been granted fifty thousand visas over a five-year period, the lottery concept for selecting applicants.

This latter is one of the more intriguing and enigmatic features of the DV phenomenon, and one that lends it global mystique and popular cachet (Goodman 2016, 275–96). But whence this idea? Why a lottery, a game of chance, for selecting future citizens? Both Anna Law (personal communication, May 2017) and Carly Goodman (2016, 214) suggest that the lottery idea resulted from expediency and compromise during Congressional deliberations over how to administer the DV. A points system was favored early on for selecting applicants—whereby those who applied would accumulate

points for English fluency, for underrepresented country status, for educational level, and so on—but the designers of the DV were unable to agree on which points (especially whether to include English fluency, which would seem to work *against* the DV's aim of diversifying the immigrant pool) and thus settled on the lottery idea as the easiest and least expensive way to run the system. Goodman (2016, 214) also points out that during the 1980s and before (recall the military draft of the 1960s) lotteries were viewed by policy makers as an acceptable and fair way to distribute public goods.

All of this is no doubt true, but I would hasten to add that whatever pragmatic and instrumental reasons led to the selection of the lottery concept, it also resonated with the culture and economy of the time both at home and abroad—of state lotteries, market bonanzas, casinos—"casino capitalism," the Comaroffs (2000) have called it. Moreover, such cultural surfeit gives the DV a semimystical appeal and source of allure around the world (Goodman 2016, 275–96).

Listen to some of Goodman's interlocutors. A Ghanaian DV winner: "America is the only country that has given that opportunity. In the whole world it is only America that is open" (Goodman 2016, 275); an Algerian: "America, I swear to God, it's the best" (168); a Francophone African blogger: "[the DV program is] the planet's most popular game of chance" (24); an Irish applicant: "It's like the lottery; you buy one scratch card, then two, then three" (168); the editor-in-chief of Nigeria's *The Week*: "The US Visa Lottery has come to enjoy something close to religious followership in our abundantly blessed country. So irresistible is its lure that even directors-general in the government service are said to be secret worshippers on its altar" (207); another Ghanaian: "winning the lottery is actually like somebody going to heaven" (295).

Despite the sustained efforts of the Irish interest group in Congress to create a diversity allowance that would benefit their compatriots and increase European migration to the US—make no mistake, this was a "diversity" category invented for white Europeans—its implementation led to an utterly different outcome. When the new law was enacted, only a small number of Irish applied (a mere 963 received diversity visas in 1996, 359 in 1997, and 318 in 1998),[17] a trend that remains true today (only 36 Irish received diversity visas in 2016).[18] But if the Irish turned their backs on a gift horse, Africans rushed to take their place and quickly became the DV's primary beneficiaries. Since 1995 Africa has received more diversity visas than any other region.[19] Thus, in a story of cascading ironies, a system that was

created for one group went unused by it, while another that had been included only as an afterthought in order to make the program seem neutral (Goodman 2016, 195) has embraced and appropriated it. Moreover, another somersault: if the DV's progenitors' stated aim of diversifying the population was a sham, that goal has now been vindicated—but in a way that was unthinkable to the diversity lottery's authors.

While the visa lottery retains enormous popularity around the world—10 to 20 million people apply each year[20]—its piece of the US immigration pie remains small. The 50,000 diversity visas issued annually represent only 6 to 8 percent of the overall immigrant pool, whereas more than 600,000 visas are issued for family reunification, over 80 percent of the total.[21] Why family reunification on the basis of blood kinship and marriage—"U.S. immigration policy is essentially nepotistic," claims immigration attorney Michael Hethmon (2003, 396)—trumps diversity or work skill is astonishing. Such a policy preference would seem to cut against core American values.

Further, given the small number of DVs issued each year—to say nothing of the fact that Africans have long been discriminated against by US immigration law (Jacob 1992, 305, 333; Newton 2005) and remain underrepresented in the US population,[22] and that the visa lottery generates enormous goodwill and has become an effective form of public diplomacy and global soft power (Goodman 2016, 22)—it is surprising that the DV Lottery has met such opposition in Congress. From the beginning there have been attempts, mostly Republican, to eliminate it, with reasons ranging from concerns about security to worry that trafficking networks might profit from the DV Lottery to fraud among visa lottery applicants.[23] No doubt, too, but not articulated as such, are anxieties about the future of a country that is transitioning from white majority to minority, and the role played by a visa program in furthering that trend.[24]

A final twist to the saga of the DV, however, and a possible silver lining for its advocates and beneficiaries. Despite being on the Congressional chopping block from its inception (Goodman 2016, 298–312), the DV has miraculously survived—not because it has had a strong constituency making its case but because Congress has been facing more pressing issues and because that body has been unable to agree on a new immigration bill over the past decade (Goodman 2016, 297–320). In short, it is Congress's inability or failure to act that has kept the DV in business for a now more than 20-year run.

But the immigration lottery's fortuitous survival may be entering a new era. In 2013 the DV Lottery found an unexpected political voice. West Afri-

can DV winners living in Washington, DC, mounted a campaign to save the lottery, which gained the attention and support of the Congressional Black Caucus and the NAACP, both of which spoke out against its elimination. They also found a troubadour, a Cameroonian-American hip-hop musician who recorded a song in support of the DV Lottery: "[The United States is] where dreams turn into reality / because of the DV lottery / the only reason we escaped poverty / was because of the green card lottery / to take away hope for our future, it would be robbery / so please reinstate the DV lottery" (Goodman 2016, 314–15).

It is too soon to tell, of course, but were this African campaign to be successful, consider one last sweet irony: those abject outsiders—those for whom the DV Lottery was never intended and those long cast aside by US immigration policy—are now insiders with a say in the making of the laws of the land, a small becoming Africa of America. Perhaps an appropriate denouement to one of the stranger sagas in US immigration history. And a further lesson in postcoloniality.

Several touchstone themes run throughout and frame this work.

INGENUITY

This is an ethnography of a modern-day trickster, a tale of West African savvy and ingenuity. The trickster in West African folklore is someone (often a small animal or insect—a hare, a spider) who lives by his wits and cunning, outfoxing those who are stronger and more powerful. In folktale after folktale the trickster (Anansi the spider among the Ashanti of Ghana, for example) gets the better of superiors (chiefs or deities) (Rattray 1930; Courlander 1975; Pelton 1980; Tekpetey 2006; Donkor 2008, 2013), and in Caribbean colonial contexts such as Jamaica and Trinidad (where these stories traveled during the Atlantic slave trade), of slave masters and colonial authorities (Gates 1988; van Duin 2007; Marshall 2012).

If the theme of the trickster is an old one in scholarship on West Africa, especially in anthropology (Rattray 1930; Herskovits and Herskovits 1956), it nevertheless acquires new meaning at the borders of the nation at the start of the twenty-first century, in a moment of increased precariousness at home and Fortress Europe abroad. Today it is embassy officials who are the new sovereigns, deciding who will travel and who must remain behind—who has a future and who does not, who will live and who die (Agamben 1998; Schmitt 2006). The control of mobility, Achille Mbembe (2016) suggests, is

the very definition of sovereignty today. And it is trickster-fixers like Kodjo who possess the wherewithal—the magic—to make a visa appear and make travel possible. I see the encounter at the embassy as paradigmatic and the fixer-hustler as *the* figure of our time in the West African present (cf. Shipley 2015, 1).

At the same time, lest we be tempted to romanticize this contemporary Robin Hood, it is worth remembering that the trickster has always been an ambivalent figure in West African allegory, deconstructing authority, on the one hand, while pursuing his own self-interest and ravenous appetites (both culinary and sexual), on the other (Shipley 2015, 20). While Kodjo may be serving the common good—"to help Togolese live a better life abroad," as he puts it—he is also in it to make money (and acquire a visa of his own). And sometimes his own desires get in the way of the best interests of his clients.

INCARCERATION

If this is an account of Togolese street savvy, it is also one about social death, the emptiness of citizenship, and global abjection in the contemporary moment (Ferguson 1999; Makhulu, Buggenhagen, and Jackson 2010; Piot 2010; Vigh 2016). Were Togolese able to make a living at home, were political elites to stop diverting the nation's resources toward personal ends—were the nation flourishing—few would look to leave. In the 1970s and 1980s, those who left to get their degrees in France and the US returned home when they were finished with school (because they could get jobs as civil servants). Today, that is no longer the case: the state was eviscerated during the 1990s and is a shadow of its former self (Piot 2010), and all who leave today look to stay. According to one of the consuls in Lomé who was tracking student visas to the US, of the more than one thousand that were issued to Togolese students during the period 2000–2010, few had since returned.

At the same time that conditions at home compel most to want to leave, it becomes harder and harder to get the papers to do so. Getting a visa to the US requires either that you marry an American citizen, get a student or tourist visa (the latter by offering proof that you'll return—a job at home and a hefty bank account), or win the lottery. The conditions for entering Europe are similar, with a strong emphasis on family reunification (Cole and Groes 2016), albeit there is no visa lottery, and long odds remain the order of the day. This means that few Togolese, and West Africans more generally, can ever hope to travel legally and that, today more than ever, they

remain confined within the borders of the nation/region/continent. This enclaving of entire populations—a population-level politics in which "Togolese," "Ghanaians," "Nigerians," "West Africans," "Africans" are barred from exiting the space of the nation-state/continent—is a biopolitics in the purest sense (Agamben 1998; Foucault 2010), complementing and enhancing the political-economic exclusion of Africa in the age of globalization (Castells 1996; Hardt and Negri 2001; Stiglitz 2003; Easterly 2006; Sachs 2006; Moyo 2010).

Add the new biometrics to biopolitical reason and you have a fetid mix. With the creation of the post-9/11 biometric databases, which register an individual's fingerprints, retinas, and DNA (all unique to the individual), a vast warehousing of individual identities is under way that facilitates and enables new forms of border control. Among other deployments of the database, state authorities are now able to control, monitor, and punish in ways that were inconceivable before. To give a small example, the Lomé consul who used the State Department database to track how many Togolese with student visas had returned (and found that hardly any had) responded to this finding by denying many who applied for student visas that year, most of whom had already been admitted to universities in the US.

This same consul told me about a 2005 DV winner who had divorced her visa spouse after arriving in the States and had returned to Lomé six years later to petition the embassy to allow her to bring a second husband to the US. Before meeting with her, the consul had consulted the database, where he was able to track this woman's movements upon her arrival in the US, and discovered that she and her husband had gone separate ways after arriving at JFK International Airport. He took this as evidence that theirs was not a real marriage—that they had married just for the visa—and worried that the petitioner was engaged in more of the same now, perhaps marrying a second time also for money, thus engaging in a type of marital commerce.

His reasoning struck me as suspect on several counts and in ways that I shared with him. Why assume that a couple going separate ways and living apart indicates that their marriage is not real? That's one reading, of course, but Togolese spouses often live apart, at home and in the US. It all depends on where they can find shelter and income. In this case one would want to know whether the receiving party in the States had the means to care for both at the same time. If not, one of them might look elsewhere. Another alternative: that the two—legitimately married—had divorced in the meantime or decided to split up when they got to the US. Of all the pos-

sible interpretations, why would the consul assume that his (more cynical) reading was the most likely?[25] Finally, I suggested to him that it didn't seem right to second-guess a decision made by a colleague years earlier during a face-to-face interview on the basis of information gathered from a database about the petitioner's behavior after the interview.

I never discovered the outcome of the case (whether the consul let this petitioner take her new husband to the States or not), but I came away from his telling not only confirmed in the view that cultural assumptions inform consular judgment when adjudicating the futures, and indeed the life and death, of Togolese visa petitioners—a theme that runs throughout this book—but also braced by the realization that consular decision making today might be turned over to a database. And that decisions made earlier can be reassessed through subsequent behaviors via a system that tracks residence patterns, banking history, school records. Put otherwise, that a person's real motives might become visible or known through behaviors collected later in time then stored in an information bank, but whose meaning, it should be clear, can never be transparent: living apart does not mean to Togolese what it might to Americans, attempting to bring a second spouse doesn't imply a commerce in spouses, and so on. And more to my point: biometrics and databases are the order of the day and might now be used to determine a couple's authenticity—and thus the granting/not-granting of a visa and the future of would-be citizens.

LAUGHTER

Those stories told on the street about applicant travails in navigating the DV Lottery are often riotously funny. When a "wife's" pregnancy (to her real husband) unexpectedly benefits a faux couple during the interview, or a couple successfully whispers all-important information in the corridor between waiting and interrogation rooms that clinches their case, or Kodjo discovers a novel way of authenticating a marriage by having a couple play a video of their "honeymoon" instead of presenting the more common wedding photos, or when one of the embassy's fraud officers is stumped when making the rounds of a neighborhood—all these circulate on the street as humorous beyond belief.[26] But why such laughter—and why laughter at all—amidst precarity and hardship, and indeed alongside the visa lottery's more tragic stories, of which there are many?

I draw inspiration from several recent scholarly attempts to theorize

laughter amidst precarious life. In *Improvising Medicine* (2012), historian Julie Livingston writes movingly about a cancer ward in Malawi in which terminal patients share humor about their condition. She suggests that patients' laughter performs and constitutes sociality, connecting people to one another amidst precarious (terminal) health. In *Laughter Out of Place* (2013), anthropologist Donna Goldstein explores the role of humor in a Rio favela where, "despite the fact that I was caught up in a community where life was all too clearly hard, everywhere I turned I seemed to hear laughter" (2). She theorizes such laughter as a "shared oppositional aesthetic" (6)—a weapon of the weak, an aggressive act of insubordination (7)—forged within a context of power inequalities. Favela residents' "only weapons of resistance are their fierce wits and sharp tongues," she insists (14). In his much-cited articles on the African postcolony, critical theorist Achille Mbembe (1992a, 1992b) insightfully points out that West African postcolonial subjects greet dictatorial rule with utter cynicism and raucous laughter. Here humor is a political act—laughing at the dictator, finding pleasure in making fun of his phallus, his anus, his excrement.[27]

Each of these readings applies with laser-like accuracy to the Togolese context: finding friendship amidst precarity, seeking pleasure amidst pain, attempting to soften misfortune's bite.[28] Moreover, Togolese experience irresistible delight in laughing at power—recall here allegories of the trickster—an impulse born of years of repressive political rule and the cynicism such rule breeds.[29] Might not laughter be that one thing—neither property, body, respect—that power can never take away? Laughter as fugitive desire, that which forever eludes capture.

I am also interested in whether we anthropologists can write and theorize laughter and precarity together. It seems harder and harder to do so in an academic discipline whose mission seems ever more that of bearing witness to the misfortune of others—"suffering slot" anthropology, Joel Robbins (2013) has called this disciplinary imperative (see also Ortner 2016). How, then, within such a disciplinary imaginary to locate laughter, and what to make of the sort of humor that makes fun of the weak and infirm? I understand the liberal sentiment and am deeply moved by accounts of suffering by Biehl (2005), Das (2007, 2014), and others, but I also want to take my cue from my interlocutors, who live precarity and suffering in a way that few academics ever will and yet fill their lives with laughter. It seems something precious, a gift, this ability of the illiberal imagination to hold these two together, to laugh in the face of precarity and suffering.[30]

But laughter in the visa lottery context is also constitutive. The DV Lottery seems to be laughter's invention, just as laughter is the Lottery's pretext. The two are inseparable, as if laughter is directing the lottery rather than the other way around, with laughter's intimate relationship to the DV Lottery constituting the DV for Togolese itself and promoting its popularity and spread.

SECRETS

This text is also about the sharing—writing about, making public—of trade secrets. In publishing stories from the street about how to commit what US consuls consider fraud (because arranged couples falsify the date of their nuptials to avoid suspicion that theirs is a marriage of convenience), am I not betraying confidences that could harm future visa seekers? Might not my account become an embassy manual for detecting the strategies that Togolese applicant-winners use to deceive consuls? And were my account to circulate widely, might it not inform, in ways that could harm West Africans, Congressional debates about whether to continue the DV Lottery? In short, what is the ethical demand on the scholar-researcher in such an instance: speak or remain silent?

This issue—how to remain faithful to one's ethnographic material while protecting one's subjects—is a long-standing one in my home discipline (American Anthropological Association 2004) and has preoccupied me since the beginning of this project. Indeed, when I have presented this material to university audiences, some have been uneasy with my public airing of these secrets. Moreover, I am concerned not only with the larger issue of whether to publish but also, if the answer is affirmative, how to go about writing about specific cases and individuals who might be punished, even deported, if discovered.

When I have asked African friends and scholars—Achille Mbembe and Francis Nyamnjoh, among others—they've unhesitatingly responded "publish." They insist that the story of Kodjo, of his savvy and ingenuity, needs to be told, especially if contextualized within the constraints and possibilities of the current historical moment. And they're skeptical that flat-footed embassy officials would have the wherewithal to keep pace with West African street savvy.

When I put the question to Kodjo, he gave a series of thoughtful responses, also insisting that I publish. First, he said, the embassy already

knows what the street is up to—manufacturing documents, arranging marriages and falsifying the dates on marriage certificates, inventing job titles. These tactics have been public knowledge at the consulate in Lomé since at least 2005, and nothing new would be revealed by publishing this material. Second, the street is constantly coming up with new tactics and remains one step ahead of the consuls. "What you write about in this book will be ancient history by the time it is published. If the consuls were to use these stories, they would be looking in all the wrong places. By focusing on certain strategies, they will be blind to others, which only works to my advantage."[31] Third, he reminded me of a point that I had brought up during earlier conversations with him: that the DV Lottery will likely be eliminated from US immigration policy before the book sees the light of day, making the entire question moot. As mentioned, each year Republicans in Congress move to end the visa lottery—they worry that it opens the door to potential jihadists—and it will almost certainly be eliminated when a new immigration bill is enacted. Finally, Kodjo insisted, "Isn't your aim in writing this book to criticize the decisions made in the embassy as much as to reveal the secrets of the street? It is mainly for that reason that I hope you will publish this book."

For all these reasons, though still not without worry, I decided to proceed—while nevertheless disguising and anonymizing cases and actors. Thus not only are real names not used but also the years in which particular cases were adjudicated have often been falsified.

Moreover, I have been careful to disguise identities on both sides of the divide, on the street and in the embassy. Despite the imbalance of power—it is hard to imagine a consul being harmed by my account—I thought it important and judicious to protect the identity of consuls as much as that of people on the street. Several generations of US consuls over a period of ten years have been generous in sharing their knowledge about the DV Lottery with me, some inordinately so, and it would be unseemly to criticize them too openly. They are caught up in a system not of their own making in which they are simply carrying out their mandate to apply the laws of the land to those applying for visas. My critique is of the system, not so much of those implementing it.

I faced a parallel ethical issue more related to fieldwork than to writing: How to respond to actors on both sides—both Kodjo and the consuls—who wanted to know, and sometimes asked for, information about the other? When consuls found out I was collaborating with a fixer—and it is impor-

tant to be clear here: each side knew I was conducting interviews with those on the other side of the divide—they sometimes asked me how he operated, recruited clients, or raised money. Moreover, I often had information about ongoing cases that the consuls could have benefited from. On the flip side, I sometimes had information about consuls whom Kodjo asked about—who was the consul and who the vice? (He profiles consuls and likes to know the chain of command, especially when things go awry for one of his clients.) Which of the two consuls spoke decent French and which didn't? (So he could prep clients in how to behave if the consul's comprehension seems not up to speed during the interview.) Were they married to an African? (Something he feels makes them more sympathetic.) One time he asked if I knew (I didn't) whether a particular consul who had a history of making out-of-the-box decisions was on vacation—information that Kodjo could take advantage of by sending a client couple to interview while that consul was away.

While my sympathies were more with the street than with the embassy, and I would have been more tempted to pass information to Kodjo than to the consulate, I decided early on to build a firewall between the two sides and not pass information either way. Not only did the idea of being a conduit for intelligence about the other make me feel uncomfortable—neither side would have approved my passing information to the other—but also it would make me into a principal player in the story I was telling (because I would be influencing the outcomes of cases I was writing about). A recent, more reflexive anthropology has quite rightly critiqued the fiction of objectivism—of researcher neutrality—in the social sciences (Marcus and Fischer 1986; Geertz 1989), but there are also limits to that critique, and this instance would seem to provide an example of such a limit.

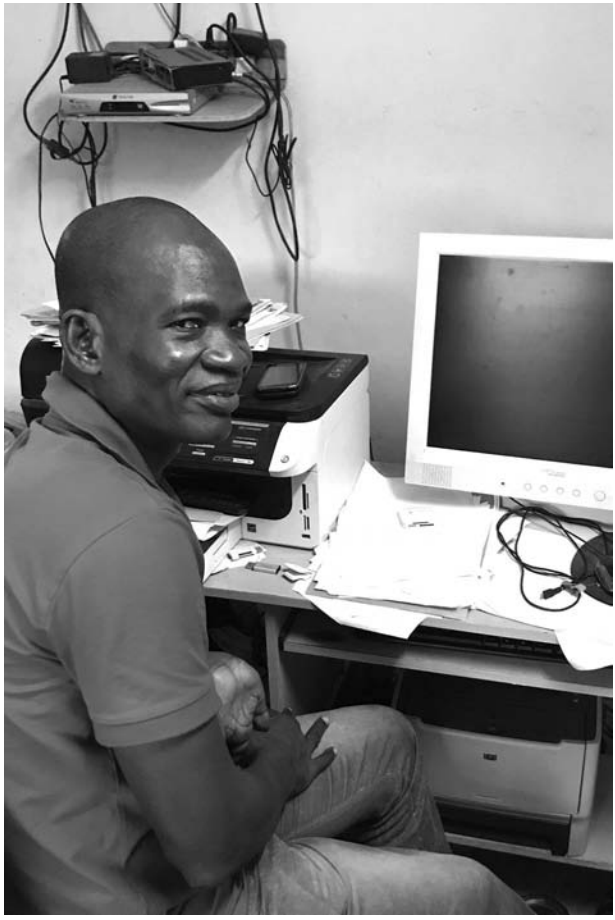
Nevertheless, on a few occasions the firewall came down and the divide between the two sides—and between the social scientist and his data—became blurred. In 2011 (date falsified), Kodjo started sending couples to Cotonou (the capital of Benin, the country just east of Togo) to interview because he felt that the consuls in Lomé were cracking down on "pop-up" marriages—a term they coined to describe cases in which spouses were added to an unmarried applicant's file after he or she had been selected. A few of Kodjo's Cotonou couples made it through, but then something unprecedented occurred. An employee at the Cotonou consulate contacted a client after his final interview, which had ended with the consul congratulating him and taking his passport (indicating that he had decided to grant

the visa), to say that he could guarantee the visa if the client paid an additional $1,000.

When Kodjo was first informed of this, he immediately assumed it was the work of Beninois working at the consulate, trying to extort money from winners (who had already paid over $1,000 for the interview fee, the cost of the medical exam, and the price of translating the documents). Kodjo contacted a traiteur friend in Cotonou who confirmed his guess. When he shared this information with me, I was appalled and decided to contact the Cotonou consulate, letting them know that there was an extortion racket at their portal. I received a one-line email back from the consul: "These are serious charges, please put us in touch with the complainant." I responded by sending the name of Kodjo's client but then heard no more. I learned from Kodjo a month later—also subsequently confirmed by the consul in Lomé—that the embassy had conducted a successful sting operation and sacked everyone involved.

I don't know whether I was right to step outside my analyst-only role here, but there seemed something outrageous about salaried embassy employees extorting money from penniless lottery winners who had raised the already steep fee for the interview and successfully jumped through all the hoops of the interview. I felt compelled to do what little I could.[32]

I influenced visa lottery practice—and what I write about—in a small way in at least one other instance. In the back-and-forth between Kodjo and me about all things DV—we meet daily when I am in Lomé, often at a small neighborhood bar, Kodjo sipping his drink of choice (always a Coke), me a Guinness—I sometimes try to understand better the logic of his practice by asking why he doesn't do things differently. One day while discussing the financial obligations Kodjo enters into when arranging marriages for client-winners, and knowing that pop-ups set off alarm bells at the embassy, I asked why he didn't forgo such marriages altogether and instead finance unmarried winners himself? Unlike arranging pop-ups, this would be entirely legal (with Kodjo effectively becoming a banker, making loans to clients rather than helping them falsify marriage documents), and he could send winners solo for the embassy interview, thereby avoiding consular suspicion and being virtually assured they would get the visa. Another benefit would be that he would no longer have to spend so much time and energy finding spouse-financiers for his winners. His answer to my query—predictably—was that once clients were on the other side of the Atlantic, he had no way of guaranteeing the debt would be repaid.



A few years later he announced—again in our familiar spot, accompanied by a Coke and a Guinness—that he had figured out a way to make my suggestion work. He had a Togolese friend in the US who would split winners' expenses with him—Kodjo covering the medical exam and embassy interview, and the friend purchasing the plane ticket, putting the winner up in the States upon arrival, then finding them a job. The friend's close involvement with these new arrivals would serve as Kodjo's guarantee that he would get his return.[33] As of this writing, the system seems to be working, with Kodjo receiving monthly installments from those he's bankrolled, with these payments deposited into a States-side bank account, from which he makes withdrawals with an ATM card his friend provided.

How best to write the narrative of the DV and its brief history in Togo? Should I organize the story thematically or chronologically? After all, the visa lottery involves a set of practices that has changed significantly over time—with the introduction of new technologies and application protocols at the embassy, with the street's adapting to the new requirements and its search for novel sources of funding—thus suggesting the evolving history of the DV Lottery in Togo as an organizing device. Another sequential framing, which I have sometimes used when presenting this material during talks, would be to follow the journey of Togolese lottery winners from start to terminus, from precarious homeland to the land of their dreams, while focusing on the Rubicon between—the search for financing and the challenge of the embassy interview. A third rubric, and the one I have chosen, is to proceed thematically, while nevertheless not losing sight of the two chronological story lines.

Chapter 1, "Border Practice," gives an overview of the DV Lottery and of Kodjo's practice of signing up and funding applicants. The second chapter focuses on the applicant interview at the consulate. This cagey encounter between consul and visa applicant—during which consuls try to decide whether an applicant's identity is what they claim it is, whether a marriage is "real," whether the winner is indeed a mechanic specializing in computerized vehicles—commands Kodjo's close attention and is the heart and soul of his practice. He spends weeks preparing clients for the interview before anxiously awaiting the outcome—always unpredictable—of the drama unfolding inside the embassy. Focusing on the interview also enables me to begin to track consular reason in deciding the "visa-worthiness" of those who come before them.

Chapter 3, "Kinship by Other Means," examines the often unexpected twists and turns that visa lottery marriages and identity substitutions take and explores the new social and relational forms that the DV Lottery brings into being. It is perhaps not surprising that arranged marriages can become real, with the DV Lottery providing the occasion for a long-term relationship. In also focusing on the differences between Togolese and US conceptions of family, this chapter opens a space for critique of State Department categories, calling into question consular attempts to adjudicate real from fake.

Chapter 4, "Trading Futures," examines the economics of this system with a global spread—how the State Department sets fees, how Kodjo raises money for clients, how debt and credit lubricate the trans-Atlantic networks that bind clients to Kodjo and their sponsors. This chapter also describes the rumors that feed street-side views of the consuls and consular views of the street—storytelling that affects DV financing. The chapter ends by considering one of the DV Lottery's most interesting and peculiar features—that acquiring a visa to the US is based on a game of chance, a raffle that decides the fate of winners from among up to 20 million applicants worldwide.

The next three chapters focus on the embassy. Chapter 5, "Embassy Indiscretions," tracks the often subjective decision making that consuls engage in, as seen through Kodjo's eyes. He has a jurist's mind and a strong interest in seeing that the rules are followed, and he is eagle-eyed about violations of DV protocol. Chapters 6 and 7 follow two events that show the consuls moving beyond the walls of the embassy in pursuit of fraud and fixers. The first was a six-month sit-in at the gates of the embassy in Lomé by those who had been denied visas—on arbitrary grounds, they felt—during the years 2005–2007. Their protest followed a turbulent period at the consulate, when it was staffed by two consuls who felt that a majority of those who came for the visa interview were fraudsters and turned most away. Among other things, the protest engendered extravagant rumoring on both sides—among the protestors about embassy intent and in the embassy about protestor motive—and led to a fascinating blurring of the boundary between embassy and street. The second event involved the embassy's imprisonment of Kodjo for three months in Burkina Faso, where he had gone to meet with Burkinabé clients. One of his winners went to the consulate with a query, which triggered an embassy sting operation and then a complaint filed with local police. The complaint proved groundless—embassy personnel didn't even show up when the case went before a jury of judges—providing another example of embassy overreach.

The book's penultimate chapter follows DV Lottery winners in the US, asking what has become of their fantasy now that they are on the other side, in "le pays de nos rêves." Sadly, these are often stories of disappointment and nostalgic longing for home. The final chapter describes conversations I had with Kodjo in February 2018, a month after Trump's sneering remarks about the DV and his promise to strike it from US immigration policy. In this short coda, Kodjo reflects not only on Trump's bombast but also on difficult issues

at the heart of this book: the risks involved in publishing DV secrets, Kodjo's role in facilitating an exodus of Togolese to a country where they may never feel at home, the question of trust—is it possible to have confidence in anyone anywhere anymore?—in a world of ubiquitous fakes and fraud. Needless to say, the issue of who-can-I-trust is one with global reach today, not just the possession of a small West African country.

While theory informs *The Fixer* and references to theory are scattered throughout the text and its footnotes, I wanted to write a book in which citational practice did not overwhelm the stories of the DV Lottery. I thus aim as much as possible to let the stories speak for themselves. Put otherwise, I wanted the ethnography—these stories from the street—to stand as their own (vernacular) theorizing, their own theory from the South (Comaroff and Comaroff 2011; Obarrio 2012).