**Movement as Lifeblood in the Contemporary Global Age**

The narrative of humanity is written in our footsteps. Tracing our paths across time takes us through wide swaths of space. People move; their natural state is that of motion. Historically, mobile populations roamed the Earth and transit drove social, cultural and economic change. It is material to acknowledge, however, that this openness has some measure of exclusivity. For some, it is more difficult to move - not because of intrinsic traits, but extrinsic forces. This holds particularly true for Africans who seek to do. While the borders of the world have become more porous, some features of the globalized age have hardened these boundaries for them especially. Encounters in this world are two sides of the same coin in this way; each simultaneously abounds with opportunity and constraint for hopeful African migrants.

***Africa’s Long History of Migration.***

That we live *now* in a “global” age is something of a misnomer. It, correctly, implies the movement of people, and with them their knowledge and lives. And though we can recognize that we live in such an age now, how far back does this *contemporary* age of motion extend? Could it be that the movement of the ancient world be contemporaneous with the movement of the modern world? Transit is nothing new, after all. Certainly not on the African continent, where the story does *not* begin within any European context of exploration and discovery (Green 2019, 32-34). The first movers were not those braving the Mediterranean seeking asylum in Europe, nor are they the visa-winning West African immigrants that desire entry into the States, nor are they the African nationals staking their claim in the Chinese metropole. In fact, Toby Green writes that globalization gripped Africa so early on that there exist chronicles of “ambassadors from the region of Ethiopia [going] to the Chinese Court around 150 BCE.” (Green 2019, 32)

One of the earliest examples of this movement are the pastoral groups that roved across what once was the Saharan *savannah*. Later, the Bantu migration would come to define movement across the continent. From Central Africa, the Bantu spread across the rest of the land mass, bringing with them their culture and technological innovation. They sowed the seeds of great civilizations - the Swahili and the Zulu, for example. (McGann 2017) So impactful were their movements that two-thirds of sub-Saharan African can find their language rooted in these early migrants. This was motion sans borders, driven by necessity and constrained only by physical limitation.

Successive migration radiated from the cosmopolitan population centers of the great ancient African kingdoms. By the 14th century, long before the “globalizing” driving European interest in colonizing the sovereign states of the continent, states such as the empire of Mali created globality in their own right. Massive caravans ran toward Egypt (Green 2019, 47), originating from the center of an state that promoted a “globalization of movement” (Green 2019, 49). The to-and-fro of merchants generated “a dynamic economic framework with complex trading patterns” across the sea and over the sands (Green 2019, 58-59). When modern archeologists swept over the former site of Djenné, a city in the southwest of modern Mali, they found precious beads hailing all the way from Han Dynasty China among other trade goods from eastern Mediterranean marketplaces (French 2021, 19). African persons have always had reason to move; travel sustained them. Where they landed, they thrived.

***Modern Outward Migration.***

The bounds in technology that accompanied the transition from the 20th to 21st century expanded the horizons of possibility for these persons-in-transit. Continuing the tradition of movement as a lifeblood practice, exploring potential lives in places far from home, African persons seeking to migrate are met with a world of vast potential. Opportunity abounds as diasporic communities take root in disparate locales. However, despite how *open* this new globality may at first appear, its limitations appear just as readily. For every new chance at migration, obstacles constrain the would-be movers, keeping them anchored to where they stand.

Charles Piot presents a vignette of this crisis of movement, zeroing in on the United States’ diversity visa (DV) lottery and its impact in Togo and the broader West Africa. On its face, the lottery was designed to *encourage* immigration. When Congress conceived the system in the 80s, it served to expand access to the U.S. from underrepresented countries. On its own, Togo brings in from 100,000 to an impressive upwards of 1,000,000 applicants a year, attracted to “‘le pays de nos reves’(the country of our dreams)”as a contrast to their “untenable” lives at home (Piot and Batema 2019, 1-2). This is an openness in two forms. One comes on the part of the individual, who casts out their lot in search of opportunity as a migrant abroad; the other, on the part of the superpower nation held aloft on a pedestal, whose borders have seemingly been vested with an uncharacteristic porousness. Suddenly, hard boundaries meant to filter and restrict appeared to morph into those through which people could pass more easily. Though, as many Togolese hopefuls would come to realize, this new, expansive future was more restrictive than they might have imagined. The path from West Africa to America is mired in a bramble of complexity, each stopping point another opportunity to be constrained.

Assuming one wins the lottery, the embassy serves as the intermediary, filtering the supposedly worthy from supposedly unfit. This acts as a border in itself, though not as tangible as a fence across land or airport security installation. Rather, it is a border even *more* artificially created than the mapped demarcations that serve to keep people out and, on occasion as in the case of the DV lottery, open briefly to let them in. This border, like any other, is mediated by human discretion in the hands of official agents: embassy consuls. To cross this boundary is to put forward a bulk of resources - financial, temporal, emotional.

Part of this *border crossing* encounter occurs at the interview window, during which time “they will put the applicant through the paces” (Piot and Batema 2019, 45) should they suspect a story that is not airtight. With “the futures of everyone in the room hanging in the balance, this is a space of considerable anticipation and anxiety,” it becomes a necessary dance to curtail suspicion which would halt an individual’s migration route in its tracks. The interview is such an Achilles Heel in the stories of many would-be migrants that Kodjo - Piot’s primary protagonist and a fixer who brokers arrangements that aid lottery winners - must coach them in the ways of “self-fashioning” (Piot and Batema 2019, 46). In a way, these hopefuls must assume an imagined persona. They must study not only an extensive list of questions probing every crevice of their lives at home “to test their truthfulness,” but also how to act during the interview, what faux pas to avoid, and how to aesthetically style themselves (Piot and Batema 2019, 46). Kodjo even goes so far as to offer “relationship” counseling to new couples insofar as to allow the applicants to be able to answer questions as each other to maintain an image of authenticity (Piot and Batema 2019, 48). While drawing from true life experience is preferred to present an air of truthfulness, at times this may not even be enough. One’s mannerisms, one’s responses, the monotony of one’s story, the lack of a who-you-know can all be grounds for a falsely shrewd consul to weed them out (Piot and Batema 2019, 111). If a migrant is not only one who moves but one who may be *allowed* to move in our contemporary system of checks, then just *who* is a migrant if the sum total of their life experiences is not enough?

That is not to say that this bureaucratically created border is an impermeable boundary. On the contrary, there have been many visa winners who have been able to cross the threshold and stake a new claim in the United States. But the exception is rarely ever the rule. There is an arbitrariness to it, to some extent, in part because the middlemen are prone to human unpredictability. One of Kodjo’s main offerings was allowing the applicants who sought his services the opportunity to add dependents (Piot and Batema 2019, 31-32), whereupon they would be able to take these dependents - whether real or false - with them, effectively circumventing the otherwise high bar of entry. In some way, this makes it easier for some to migrate; if one knows a visa lottery winner, it may be possible to skip some of the trouble. This in itself refers back to the creation of an imagined persona, necessary and implying a certain difficulty to pass through without suspicion; a closedness. On the same note, this closedness extends into another form on the part of the embassy. In an extreme example, two consuls had caught wind of the practice from a radio advertisement in Lomé and “Chastened by this knowledge, Decker and Brown [the consuls] began rejecting all who came before them, regardless of the merits of their cases.” (Piot and Batema 2019, 113) Though, at the same time Kodjo held fast to the belief that some fraud officers would accept bribes to look the other way during their investigation (Piot and Batema 2019, 114-115). These two cases, standing on opposite ends of an axis, lend this arbitrariness a measure of *both* possibility and constraint. Merely being able to grease palms or socially schmooze one’s way into a consul’s good graces might be grounds for acceptance may open many doors for some migrants - though these doors may still demand the exhaustion of resources that the majority will not have. At the same time, those like Decker and Brown may close off these same doors without reason, effectively stonewalling migrants-to-be from success. The unpredictability of what one can expect from these decision-makers affected by bias and unknowable motivations creates an uneasy tension between they, who hold the power of possibility, and the applicants, who are more or less at their whim. This power differential is far from a non-issue, certainly to those rejectees that would congregate in mass protest. These red-shirts claimed en masse “that their cases had been rejected on arbitrary grounds and without stated reason.” (Piot and Batema 2019, 125) The protest would drag on for years with varying levels out show-out across time, but throughout it all lay the unifying thread of feeling they were owed more. And perhaps they *were* owed more. The freedom to move, and to dream of movement, is a human condition, and one that confers the ability to define one’s own life.

That is undoubtedly the reason why many African persons opt to travel, rather than to the US under any visa lottery, to China. Guangzhou stands as a beacon where opportunity abounds, attracting African nations in droves who had heard of the scale of possibility available were they to go and stake their claims. This spirit finds expression in the very name of the film *Guangzhou Dream Factory*, a documentary that centers on a number of African immigrants to the city. Here, a dream machine churns out the potential for success, both spurred by and inspiring migration. As early as the 90s, African merchants lined their wallets with profits made from carting Chinese-made electronics back home and reselling them to a vibrant and expecting market (Badgley 2016). Thus, these “early” migrations - a relative earliness, bearing in mind the fact that ancient Africans were no strangers to Chinese court (Green 2019) - created something of a positive feedback loop. Opportunism gripped these pre-2000s entrepreneurs to migrate, if briefly, across borders and return, opening the door to Guangzhou serving as an economic signal and resulting in more and more Africa-originating migration.

One may need look no further than a large, orange building blending into an avenue of highrises in the city, Mandarin lettering beside Roman letters naming it the Bole City Market. A casual observer would likely not be able to pick the structure out of the skyline if they were not looking for it; this cohesive inclusion is perhaps symbolically representative of how *intrinsic* the commercial and cultural exchange between these African nationals and their Chinese metropolitan destination. Nestled in the city, the Market exists largely to service a predominantly African buying population, the density of African entrepreneurs based there necessarily implying a similarly existent market of African residents here. Market stalls in the labyrinth of hallways, patrolled both by roving merchants - like Favour Prosper, who spends her workday selling a traditional African dish, moi-moi, to her fellow sellers - and customers mark the day-to-day. (Badgley 2016) In this way, Bole Market might be a microcosm of the locales where migrants land: communities driven by hope for opportunity that both integrate into the immediate ecosystem while retaining their culture. There is possibility in being able to call a new place “home,” not only because of the familiar food and cultural touchbases like Aunt Raheama’s Ugandan community group (Badgley 2016), but also as a site of individual success. Certainly, that is not to say that the experience is characterized by any sort of immediate triumph. While there are numerous still-operating shops in the Market, many have shuttered doors; those who remain must often scrape by to sustain themselves with the exception of other Guangzhou-based African entrepreneurs like Kingsley Azieh Che, a suit manufacturer operating in his own warehouse and reaping the benefit of selling in bulk to Africa while utilizing the Chinese labor market (Badgley 2016). This falls to an issue of class, a socioeconomic stratification that should dispel any idea of a homogenous “African community.” Migration and the futures associated with said migration is variably affected by the ability of an individual to acquire and allocate their resources. As in the case of the DV lottery process, the ability to move is locked behind having financial capability, among other things. Che represents the managerial class and for it he enjoys a measure of success in his Guangzhou home, but for the majority who are unable to weather the cost of being transient, life is more unstable. Visas, both working and student, are like gold: difficult to come by and easy to lose, but highly desired, especially in a time of immigration crackdown and deportation raids (Badgley 2016). Much like the difficulty in obtaining a U.S. diversity visa, this constraint make life uncertain. While people hold a visa, they cherish it; it is their out when home seems *untenable* and opportunity is in decline.

***Foreign Migration to Africa***

Africa, however, has never truly been anything close to the desertified wasteland of deprivation and a lack of opportunity as popular imagery may have it seem. To the contrary, as even as African nationals diasporate across the world, there is a significant inflow of resources to the continent itself. The narrator in *Guangzhou Dream Factory* recounted anecdotally how a market in Accra was dominated by “Made in China” goods (Badgley 2016). Not only is Africa entering China, then, but China is similarly entering Africa. One of the best examples may be Zambia.

There, a tapestry hangs in the office of Felix Mutati, their minister for Commerce, Trade and Industry. Gold Chinese letters adorn a pitch-black field, taking up a sizable portion of the back wall over a long conference table. When asked, Mutati says that he’s brought a few people in to translate, but none have been able to. Whatever it says is a mystery. Still, he says that it fosters in him an imagination of where he leads the country (Francis and Francis 2011). Here, there is a metaphor about the relationship between African states hoping for prosperity and agents in China with the supposed means to help them do so. For the purposes of the latter, the continent is a treasure trove of opportunity, a worthful place into which one might migrate to exploit. The former, meanwhile the recipient of this migration, might be hopeful for what fruitful business it may bring.

In the case of the Zambian state in particular, theirs was a chance at infrastructural development. In partnership with the China-Henan corporation, who had been commissioned to repair and resurface Tuta Road (Francis and Francis 2011), the Zambian government engaged in a cross-border exchange of *human* resources. Both parties could materially benefit from the arrangement: Zambia with the stimulation of a major transportation artery, and the class of Chinese managers who had won the contract. Of particular note here are indeed those managers, those middle-class migrants who, like Che in Guangzhou, possess the means to continue to benefit from these migration-induced dealings. On the other side of the issue, individual entrepreneurs are more or less able to strike out on their own in Africa. Also based in Zambia, Liu Changming, a Chinese national who owns a farm and empty acreage, provides an apt example. Changming and his family employ persons from local villages to perform work for meager pay, and theirs is likewise a cultural encounter not unlike when African individuals land in Guangzhou. One of Changming’s relatives communicates in a pidgin language somewhere between English, her native language, and whatever she can hope the locals understand; another encounter is not unlike Bole City Market (Badgley 2016), a marketplace where Chinese merchants sell some of their own wares, Changming included. (Francis and Francis 2016)

As could be expected, these opportunity-creating encounters are not without their drawbacks, for Zambians especially. Concerning the Tuta Road development project, China-Henan withdrew citing a financial impasse (Francis and Francis 2016). Their presence at all, in a way, pointed to another imbalance and a constraint in the globalized age of migration-driven commerce. That they were able to cut the government a better deal meant that they had taken the opportunity from local industry, perhaps contributing to the creation of the condition of a lack of mobility and opportunity that drives people to leave. It constrains their life at home and makes a life abroad seem more plentiful. And, as has been evident, they *do* leave. They move.

Our “contemporary” age of movement is nothing new, simply a continuation of long lineages of human beings that have been in-transit for centuries. And though technology has enabled faster, more efficient migration to take place, as time progresses the inequities in travel possibilities become more pronounced. The freedom to move has long been written into our history, but constraining border practices and diminishing returns on these movements for those in lower strata are suffocating. They demand time, money, and emotional resources. If one cannot pay up, do they have no right to do as humans have always done? In whose hands does the power *rightly* lie? African migrants must grapple with these questions, even if just implicitly, as they face a world that is rich in possibility yet confined by impossibility.

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