

Black Spots: Roads and Risk in Rural Kenya

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation examines “post-agrarian” transformations in Kenyan rural areas. But where rural transformation is usually written as a story about land, *Black Spots* is a story about roads. Kenya’s massive investment in roads infrastructure over the last decade has intersected with the decline in smallholder agriculture in such a way that, for many rural residents, fortunes are now imagined on the road rather than on the land. Roadside trade, transport, and even salvage from crashes provide supplementary livings for rural populations facing declining agricultural opportunities. The dissertation argues that in the context of austerity policies and rural abandonment, road work and its “fast money” not only expose roadside residents to physical danger, but also entrench entrepreneurial risk ideology into local imaginaries.

With the road accident as a lens illuminating a wider landscape of rural hazard, the dissertation shows how rural residents refashion relationships to land, work, technology, and loss in high-risk environments. At the same time, it demonstrates the limits of “risk”—that is, a calculated engagement with potential loss, conducted in the interest of profit—as a framework for managing contingency. In this sense, *Black Spots* is both an ethnography of risk and of what risk fails to capture. It tracks how rural residents learn to engage bodily and economic hazard and to understand it as risk; how they coordinate the disparate temporalities and technologies of life on the road and life on the land; and how they withstand loss when these attempts do not go as planned. The dissertation thus advances two parallel concerns: on the one hand, it demonstrates

how economic practice is at once bodily and reasoned. On the other, it considers how experiences of and ideas about contingency are shaped in relation to shifting economic, social, and infrastructural possibilities.

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Emmo, this is for you.

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All names, except the names of public figures, are pseudonyms. Some places have been renamed. All images are by the author unless otherwise indicated.

PREFACE

In 2009, an infamous accident now known as the Sachangwan Tragedy took place on Kenya's Nakuru-Eldoret highway. A petrol tanker bound for Juba, South Sudan overturned on a stretch of highway that climbs a long hill from the hot plains of the Rift Valley to the cool, forested Mau escarpment. A crowd quickly materialized to collect fuel spilling onto the ground, many of them residents of the nearby villages of Kibunja, Sachangwan, Migaa, and the growing settlement at Gaakwen. Suddenly, a fire started and leapt along the spilt petrol until the tanker exploded, ultimately killing over one hundred people and injuring many more. In descriptions of the event, I was told that the people collecting fuel and carrying it home left trails of drips which guided the fire deep into the bush; others said that the fuel's fumes had dispersed in the air, spreading it far and wide; the fire was like a contagion. A resident of a nearby settlement emphasized that no one was spared: if someone who had been fetching fuel touched you, or even breathed on you you burned, you were "melted."

The event attracted national attention, but none of this attention seemed to provide resolution. Instead, the stories and rumors that surrounded the crash illustrated how discourses of accident, risk, and vulnerability operate to both explain and censure. Blame circled, never able to find good purchase. National media, with the characteristic mix of sympathy and paternalism that informs attitudes towards rural populations, at once depicted the "anguish" of mourning villagers and commented on their "carelessness" and "ignorance." As one television commentator put it, "Why did those people put themselves in such a risky situation? It cannot

always be assumed that common sense is common. This is why we need civic education.”¹ Even reporting that recognized the village’s extreme poverty nevertheless described the fuel collection as a kind of greed: “the economic strain here drove many to seek *an easy way to get that extra coin,*” says another television presenter.² In the same broadcast, an eyewitness claimed that villagers should have known better than to mishandle a combustible commodity, and lamented the acquisitiveness of the Kenyan citizenry: “This is because Kenyans are obsessed with free things. You don’t rush to your death just because you are looking for ten liters of fuel.”³

Government officials, similarly, cast the villagers as either ignorant or undisciplined, alternately arguing that they needed to be educated and that they should be more forcefully prevented from taking commodities from the international trade route. At the public funeral, the major politicians of the day took turns expressing condolences and drawing lessons from the event. In perhaps the most memorable exchange, the Minister for the Interior George Saitoti’s declaration that “the deaths of our people should be a lesson” (“*kufariki kwa watu wetu iwe sasa ni funzo*”) provoked First Lady Lucy Kibaki to lash out against him.⁴ Perhaps willfully misunderstanding his comment, she asked, “How can dead people be taught a lesson? They are already dead.” She went on to emphasize the need for education, promoting a softer version of paternalistic education to contrast with the threat implied in Saitoti’s “lesson”: “Our people are

¹ “First Lady Attacks Saitoti Over Tanker Tragedy.” NTV Report. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k3XKoHG1krw>>

² “Survivors of Sachangwan Tragedy”: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6YHW2QOP5f4>>

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ George Saitoti’s own death story deserves a book. An economist and politician who served in several different government positions (including as Vice President under Moi and Defense and Security Minister), he died in a helicopter crash in 2012. Drawing on a long tradition of disguising political assassinations as road accidents, many assumed the crash to have been an assassination. Saitoti had been favored as a presidential candidate for the 2013 election. The inquest into the crash was inconclusive and his family claimed a cover up.

ignorant but they are innocent. They treat petrol like water... How would they know if we don't educate them?"⁵

Assessments from a wide range of commentators, then, presented villagers' turn to the road as a "mistake," whether one made out of innocence or perversity. And villagers, too, berated themselves for allowing their friends and relatives to "go to the road" and collect fuel, commenting that size of the spill made the crash seem like an unexpected gift and one that was hard to refuse.⁶ But rather than describing villagers actions as perverse, they drew on the language of necessity. One resident said that his sons went to fetch petrol to sell because they did not have enough money to buy *unga* (flour)—which is to say, they had no food. The cost of petrol was high, because the crash occurred during a fuel shortage, and the find was especially attractive. Thus one news commentator, after interviewing these villagers, brushed away statements about the ignorance of the villagers and instead explained that *need* forced people to engage in risky activities. More, they would do it again, in full awareness of the consequences: "hunger would inspire repeated courage even if another tanker was to fall in future." She went on to point out that despite the supposed fertility of the area, "villagers go hungry between the planting and the harvest." The land is simply not enough; they are destined to remain scavengers of the road: "No doubt one eye will remain on the farms and the other on the highway for that possible find...irrespective of the risk."⁷

⁵ "First Lady Attacks..." op. cit.

⁶ "Survivors..." op. cit. and newspaper reports

⁷ Ibid.

This sense of split vision—an eye on the highway, an eye on the farm—captures, in my view, something quite essential about roadside populations across Kenya. In the context of the decline of rural livelihoods, the road offers opportunities that supplement, and become integrated into, lives organized around agricultural production. And with new opportunities come new hazards. The Sachangwan fire was a spectacular example, but involvement with the road routinely puts people at risk of injury and death. Accessing the road’s opportunities therefore entails the labor of making risk *acceptable*, rather than avoidable.

In the case of Sachangwan, the work of “explaining” the accident to a Kenyan public largely ignored the more mundane ways in which risk features in the lives of roadside populations. Instead, the competing discourses of discipline and pity used the combustibility of petrol to present villagers’ and drivers’ actions as negligent and foolishly risky, and to explain the accident as the result of rural populations’ delay in attaining the levels of understanding which were already “common sense” to more advanced urbanites. Ultimately, help was offered in the form of compensation—a promise to provide 50,000 shillings (\$500) to the families of victims. This promise limited the scope of the harm to the event itself and sought to prevent critique from spreading into areas that were more difficult to rectify—the difficulty of agrarian life more generally, or even road regulation. But even this compensation failed to materialize. In three- and five-year memorials of the event, villagers reminded governments of these promises and their failure to fulfill them. Once the media spectacle passed on, the village was again left behind.

In these pronouncements about a tragic accident in the Rift Valley, the actually existing conditions of rural life were mostly ignored in favor of explanations that placed rural populations

somewhat behind on a path of “development.” But one might also argue that the accident was a direct outcome of development in its institutional form. Shifting development policies have shaped the economic and infrastructural conditions that allow a highly combustible commodity to become accidentally available to rural roadside populations, and dispose those populations to gather it from the road. On the one hand, these policies have reduced smallholder farmers’ ability to make a living from farming. Agriculture provides the country’s main source of foreign exchange for imports, but government policy and support tends to be skewed toward subsidizing urban industry, urban populations, and large-scale industrial agriculture. And the World Bank and IMF-led Structural Adjustment reforms of the 1980s and 90s, made smallholder farming even more difficult to sustain. More, Kenya’s current focus on attracting capital and easing access to markets means that infrastructure construction, rather than the services more traditionally associated with rural welfare (extension services, health, and education), has become the primary face of development efforts in rural parts of the country.

In the last decade, even as austerity policies continue to be implemented (IEA 2017), Kenya has poured vast sums of borrowed money into infrastructure construction—a large proportion of this on roads. This has reached the point where the public debt is at sixty percent of GDP, and approximately a quarter of the national budget now goes toward servicing that debt.⁸ In this conjuncture of “austerity” and “development,” state-led public investment primarily takes the form of infrastructure construction, while state commitments to traditional welfare programs

⁸ This is considered troubling because the proportion of interest is now higher than the initial borrowing. 45% of the debt payment is now interest payment, and short term commercial loans are becoming a regular source of debt financing. The country’s borrowing has also provoked a public conversation about the debt burden, as calculations circulate over social media about how much each Kenyan has to pay annually to service the debt, as well as what the burden will be on future generations. However, it is important to note that Kenya’s debt ratio is comparatively average, and that *concern* about debt is also a disciplining feature of austerity regimes. Thus, concern about infrastructural debt and Returns on Investment actually feeds into a sense that the national government should *not* be spending money, and ultimately helps to justify reductions in other areas of public spending.

have been radically downscaled. Despite the argument that infrastructure serves rural areas by connecting them to markets and urban centers, i.e. that it provides the conditions for rural accumulation, it is clear that infrastructure is not a *sufficient* condition.⁹

Corridor-based infrastructure in particular has become key to economic development imaginaries, and has displaced an earlier framework in which large-scale infrastructure projected aspirations to a networked and centralized nation. Instead, corridors are primarily aimed at facilitating extraction for exports and supporting the large industries of the major cities. In theory, new corridor infrastructure is supposed to also “cater to the needs of the inhabitants of areas surrounding established and designated corridors” (Mulenga 2013 for the AfDB), but this secondary development seems usually to get left out of the actual plans.¹⁰

The Sachangwan case reveals both the long history and the new exclusions of corridor-based development. The highway passing Sachangwan is East Africa’s main commodity transport route, and part of the transport corridor that leads inland from Mombasa. This path inland traces the historical route of least resistance first taken by the caravan trade between the coast and the shores of the Great Lakes of East Africa. It was then taken up by the railway, and is now traversed by the A104 highway.¹¹ In its new instantiation as a highway-based corridor,

⁹ A Kenyan roads policy analyst cautiously expresses the sense that roads alone cannot bring prosperity to rural areas: “Improvements in roads and paths, especially in rural areas, have the potential to improve the position of the poor, although they will have to be provided as part of a package of measures that include credit, extension services and investments in areas such as irrigation and water” (2001:14).

¹⁰ hill is a part of a corridor that features not only the highway but also Kenya’s oil pipeline, on its way to the depot at Eldoret. Fuel flows past Sachangwan village on two sides, then, but villagers have little access to it except by accident.

¹¹ An interesting aspect of Kenya’s long history of corridor-based infrastructure development is that one finds different infrastructures competing for the right to carry the same commodities on the same route. The oil that spilled out in Sachangwan might have been carried by rail thirty years ago, before road took over from rail as the main form of transport, or it might have gone along the current pipeline. In five years from now it could go via rail again, as a new railway is now being built to serve the same corridor, or by an expanded East African pipeline to the eastern half of the Congo, South Sudan and Uganda, for which Kenya is trying to win the route (the alternative is the Central Corridor which cuts through Tanzania to the south). The struggle over which East African country will host the pipeline reveals the geopolitical dimensions of infrastructure projects, while the choice of road over rail reveals a century long contest between state corporations and private trucking companies.

however, it is more difficult than ever for local populations to benefit from it; the route offers little to “cater to the needs” of local inhabitants. Indeed, while the villages along the route are acutely attuned to the happenings of the road, they are particularly attuned to the opportunities offered by *interruptions* to the flow of traffic. Interruptions are key to their ability to access the road’s offerings at all, because the highway itself tends to bypass, rather than to service these areas.

Some might argue that the state *never* attended to rural areas in any serious way, but this is not entirely true. Kenya’s independence government inherited an agrarian economy skewed toward the protection of large-scale settler “mixed” farms. Long idealized as the basis of Kenya’s productivity, the myth of these farms’ centrality to the economy led to many accommodations for them. At independence, the myth helped justify the idea that facilitating a smooth economic transition required preserving this agricultural model. The transition was achieved by compensating settlers richly, putting their estates on the market, and extending credit to the rural poor and landless so that they could settle the bill.

While the independence regime fantasized the rapid conversion of the agrarian economy into an urban industrialized one, they knew that this would not happen immediately, and were nervous about the numbers of landless and land-poor who were flooding cities following independence. Until independence, Kenya’s experience of proletarianization had been both partial and mainly rural—most wage laborers were employed on farms, and also maintained their own farms in reserve areas—and the city was not ready to create a proletariat (Furedi 1973). The Kericho Conference of 1966 crystallized fears that the population was urbanizing too rapidly and

that job creation in urban areas could not keep up (Kirori 2003; Leonard 1991).¹² In the 1970s, then, rural development briefly took center stage as the focus of national development. Kenya's second National Plan (1970-1974) sought—at least on paper—to correct the urban-focused “accelerated development” policy of the first years following independence. This project sought at once to maintain rural areas' longstanding role as sites that absorbed some of the harsh effects of modernization, while also creating the conditions for capitalist development in the countryside. However, the programs inaugurated under this Plan are widely understood to have failed—an inevitable outcome, Colin Leys argues, because they “simply ran counter to the development strategy implied by the regime's overall policies, which were inherently urban-oriented” (Leys 1975), and because they relied on false assumptions about a harmonious and undifferentiated peasantry.¹³

While subsequent National Plans continued to grant attention to rural areas, by the late 1970s they telegraphed a resigned sense that rural development was merely a salve for the established imbalance of the economy toward the urban. And the IMF-led restructuring of the 1980s and 90s made matters worse, particularly for smallholder farmers. Rural development had always been hobbled by the fact that “any serious effort... would have implied transfers from the better-off to the worse-off” (Leys 1975: 231), but some programs, especially education and health, did seem to improve rural “outcomes” (Kirori 2003). Austerity reforms undid many of

¹² Joe Mopero's 1970s song “Heri Nyumbani” (Home is Better), is a poignant expression of the sense that the city didn't live up to its promises. It tells the story of a casual worker who gets fed up with the difficulty of finding work in the city and decides to return to his rural area and family. As the protagonist says, “heri nirudi nyumbani... nipate kuishi na maisha mema” (It would be better to go home... for something to live on and a better life).

¹³ In Leys' assessment of the Special Rural Development Programme of 1971, he argues that it failed in part because it willfully misunderstood the effects of government policy on rural smallholders, even while maintaining a idealized vision of the rural: “It rested on illusions about the possibility of a harmonious path of rural progress based on general rural equality and social cohesion, when both of those things had already been largely destroyed or were being destroyed as fast as possible by other components of agricultural policy” (231).

these programs. Successive plans seem increasingly aware of the difficulties of surviving as a smallholder farmer. One of the last five-year plans (1997-2001)¹⁴ focused on the importance of non-farm income opportunities in rural areas. It encouraged the establishment of agro-industries in rural areas, to redirect urban migration to small towns, and promoted “informal sector development” as a source of non-farm income. Kenya had already made “informal” economic activity a recognized feature of national development in an earlier national plan, but it had nevertheless been considered a predominantly urban form of work. The 1997 Plan thus seems to be catching at straws, preparing smallholder farmers for their impending death by proposing new (albeit not particularly ‘good’) sources of livelihood.

By the time of the Sachangwan accident, then, a radical decline in smallholder economies had been underway for some time. Agro-industries often paid unlivable wages, or failed; in either case they did not produce the stable rural proletariat that had been hoped for. And a look at smallholder farms in many parts of Kenya reveals the remnants of cash crops that have promised and then failed to provide sufficient income: a quarter acre of leftover tea bushes here, a bit remaining of the maize that had replaced the tea, an acre of sugar cane that bound its owner into a milling contract and couldn’t be torn out yet, even as rumors spread that the sugar miller had stopped paying its outgrowers. In this context, roads and roadsides offer the hope of other sources of income, of access to circulating money from small businesses or work in transport, of road salvage, or the possibility of transforming agricultural land into real estate. In rural Kenya, then, keeping “one eye on the road” was also a means of establishing a connection to a world of

¹⁴ This was the second-to-last plan before the Kibaki government changed the government’s use of plans in 2008. Instead of a medium-term plan, Kibaki introduced a long-term “blueprint” titled Vision 2030, which aims to make Kenya a “middle income country” by the year 2030. It is perhaps an instantiation of Jane Guyer’s argument that national planning withers away as temporal visions become fragmented between the immediate present and a kind of “fantasy futurism.”

industrialization and growth—but rather than through employment, this world was primarily accessed through entrepreneurial endeavor, whether hazardous, illicit, or simply “informal.” Thus, even as state infrastructure investment increasingly gives up on an idea of a public that includes marginalized citizens, to instead focus on offering services to those who can pay for them, roads continue to offer a tantalizing source of opportunity to rural populations for whom the land provides neither surplus nor sustenance. As in the Sachangwan crash, however, many of these opportunities are both contingent, and high in risk. In this dissertation, I explore the forms that that contingency takes.

INTRODUCTION—ROADS AND RISK IN “POST-AGRARIAN” RURAL KENYA

Chapter One

I. THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE COUNTRYSIDE

This dissertation examines transformations in rural areas in Kenya through the unconventional lens of roads and road hazard. Austerity policies that have reduced public investment in rural development have contributed to a prolonged crisis in small farm production and rural welfare across Kenya. Occurring just as climate change, depleted soils, and land fragmentation make smallholder farming more precarious, reduced investment denies farmers protection against the shifting terrain of increasingly liberalized agrarian markets. At the same time, the government is committing a large portion of present and future public resources into infrastructure construction, under the published theory that this will support both transnational trade and ease the movement of farm produce to markets. But in the context of rural decline, this infrastructure is not working quite as promoted. Rather than using roads to take produce to market, many rural residents are using them to find alternative sources of income.

I believe that to adequately consider the question of agrarian change in Kenya today, a discussion of capitalist transformations in agriculture is insufficient. The road provides key insights into what it means to be rural in contemporary Kenya, in a context in which rural populations must find ways to endure at the margins of dominant economies and political-economic ideologies. Income from small-scale trade is more essential than ever to agrarian

economies, and many of the opportunities for this trade are found on and alongside the road.¹⁵ What I call “road work” offers an alternative to the poles of rural-agrarian-peasant and urban-industrial-wage. It thus not only suggests a different directionality to the one offered by the classic studies of rural transformation, it also illuminates in useful ways the position of rural communities in an austerity economy that promotes self-reliance, entrepreneurialism, and highly contingent labor forms.¹⁶ From the road one can see in a new way how rural spaces are becoming, to borrow a term from Andries du Toit (2017), “post-agrarian.”

Following in a tradition of infrastructure studies, then, I take road development as representative of a particular regime of accumulation (liberal capitalism) and as a material form that can be ethnographically studied for insight into the imaginative visions and blind spots of a political-economic system at work. And following in a tradition of agrarian studies, I am interested in the articulations of this system with the rural populations who were once called “peasants.” The “articulation” of pre- or non-capitalist modes of production with modern capitalism has been one of the dominant themes in agrarian studies of sub-Saharan Africa (Berman and Lonsdale 1992; Byres 1977), but unlike those earlier studies, this dissertation encounters rural spaces as already thoroughly integrated into capitalist production and

¹⁵ Gavin Kitching, who wrote one of the most cited discussions of the agrarian question in Kenya, *Class and Economic Change in Kenya* (1980), argued that in Kenya’s regime of accumulation, off-farm income was a main source of peasant class differentiation.

¹⁶ I should emphasize that the importance of road work within rural life is by no means a new phenomenon, but a) it has been marginalized by debates which conflated the agrarian question with agriculture; and b) it is taking on an increased importance in the context of declining agrarian productivity.

exchange.¹⁷ Land reform from the 1950s onward, under the Swynnerton Plan and other policies, progressively incorporated Kenyan smallholder farmers into land enclosure, individual property tenure, and credit-debt regimes that made farming into a commercial and explicitly entrepreneurial endeavor. Thus I do not describe the social and economic configurations of the road in terms of the appearance of capitalist formations within “traditional” society but rather in terms of a textured relationship to capitalism.

I seek to capture the role of roads in rural life by focusing on a paradoxical condition: roads both hold out the promise of connection and opportunity and create the conditions for marginalization and harm. As Penelope Harvey and Hannah Knox put it, with the road comes a promise of “greater wealth, greater health, greater connectivity” (2015). At the same time, on and along the road, populations have an acute sense of being peripheral to this promise. Furthermore, they routinely encounter the “dark side” of the road: the way that it regularly produces destruction and loss, not only in the violent form of road accidents but also in the less eventful, but nonetheless radical, loss of rural ways of life. Increasingly, I will argue, this paradox is understood as “risk”—a conceptual form that explains loss as *an inherent condition* of profit; and which produces entrepreneurial subjects who understand their vulnerability as their own responsibility. I will demonstrate that engagement with risk is central to what it means to be a rural subject in today’s “post-agrarian” Kenya, at least alongside the road.

¹⁷ This is illustrated, for instance, by Michael Cowen’s argument that as early as the 1970s rural populations in Kenya were so integrated into commercial food markets that to promote policies of household autonomy and food self-sufficiency would actually lead to an increase in hunger (Cowen 1983). Among the contributions of Cowen’s work was a critique of an undifferentiated use of the idea of “surplus.” He pointed out that “marketed surplus,” among smallholder farmers, often referred not to production that was in excess of their total subsistence needs, but rather referred to what they sold. Because most smallholders both sold and bought food, this “marketed surplus” could end up funding, or even be insufficient for, their subsistence needs. A family could sell a “surplus” and still go hungry.

This dissertation, then, is an ethnography of rural transformation told from the perspective of the road and its contingencies. It focuses on new forms of social and economic practice on and along the road, as they are shaped by both the material and aspirational dimensions of infrastructure, and as they emerge in relation to rural histories, economic ideologies, and shifting epistemic philosophies. It seeks to understand how rural roadside residents craft new dispositions toward opportunity and hazard, in the context of longstanding marginalization, and in hopes of generating a productive future. It examines how rural residents learn to engage in physically and financially hazardous forms of work; to coordinate the disparate temporalities, expectations, and obligations of life on the road and life on the *boma* (the rural household); and to withstand loss when these attempts at coordination do not go as planned. And it examines the other side of these attempts: how loss produces fractures that are difficult to recover from, and how routine experience of hazard creates understandings of value that are understood as expressions of marginality.

In a sense, this is both an ethnography of risk and of what risk fails to capture. It seeks to understand, ethnographically, how new vulnerabilities and new opportunities are conceptually produced as “risk”—that is, as a calculation of the likelihood of future loss, conducted in the interest of profit—and how bodies and communities become disposed to engage in risk and to understand hazard *as* risk. At the same time, it examines the leakages that the risk concept cannot contain: the responses to hazard and loss that cannot always be recuperated into a risk framework and moments when the accident overwhelms the risk concept. I call this ambivalence around hazard and profit the “ethics of risk.”

To capture this ambivalence at a site where it is concentrated, this dissertation focuses on the life of two so-called “black spots,” two roadside communities located at stretches of road labeled as “accident-prone.” From these sites—a village named Shimalabandu in western Kenya and a truck stop called Gaakwen in the Rift Valley—I examine the complexity of post-agrarian rural life. Roadside rural spaces in Kenya do not fit a traditional picture of rural life at all. They feature many of the classic dynamics of the urban: they are dense, diverse, fast-paced, and risky. Although these roadside areas remain marginalized in many ways from urban centers and dominant economies, they also require a revised conception of what “the rural” is. The life of these two sites reveals that for rural populations, interactions with the road are defined less by connectivity than by the social and economic formations that appear at the interface of an infrastructural system and a rural hinterland. These “niches,” to use Jane Guyer’s (1998) term, are organized around their appropriation of risk. From these sites, I aim to describe how marginalized rural populations continue to reorient themselves in relation to the economic transformations that shape their conditions of possibility.

Themes and Aims

In order to consider the complexity of rural transformation, each of the ethnographic chapters of this dissertation looks at changing rural space and risk through a slightly different lens. Drawing on fieldwork in two sites, Shimalabandu and Gaakwen, the chapters focus on themes or moments that seemed to condense current dynamics: “Circulation” focuses on a new kind of road work; “Truck Stop Home” on mobility and real estate; “Death and the Boma” on

accidental death and its social ramifications; and “Intentional Accidents and the Remainder” on illicit road trades. These chapters traverse a diverse set of interests—including questions of “post-agrarian” rural transformation; theories of causation and eventfulness; and accounts of infrastructural regimes. However, a pair of problematics animates the selection of sites and stories: *accumulation* and *accident*. Part 1, “Accumulation,” engages with the classic question of agrarian accumulation, by considering the relationship between road-based and land-based regimes of accumulation in post-agrarian rural Kenya. It explores how the practices and meanings of accumulation respond to new material conditions, and with what implications for an understanding of economic practice and productivity more generally.

Part 2, “Accident,” considers how rural populations engage with road accidents, in often unexpected ways. Anthropologists have long been interested in unexpected misfortune as a site at which to examine the construction of rationality. Here I explore questions of contingency, loss, and salvage or remainder to demonstrate how rural residents actively *work on* the concept of accident, shaping it to their particular purposes, even as they are also *worked on* by the experience of misfortune. I will show that risk is a central framework through which the idea of accident is elaborated; but also that it is not the only framework for understanding hazard and loss.

I argue that the construction of both accumulation and accident in contemporary rural Kenya is linked in important ways with the promise and material presence of networked infrastructure, particularly roads. The ideologies promoting road construction are shaped by the idea that networked infrastructure is a “vector of capitalist modernity.” By disposing populations in both moral and material ways, networked infrastructure was to provide the conditions for

capitalist accumulation. In colonized spaces, it was to shake populations loose from the land and from social obligation by creating mobile subjects, and to provide the channels for the smooth exchange of goods and ideas. But infrastructural modernization has not resulted in the material and moral transformations that colonial and independence-era ideologues envisioned (Bear 2007; Gidwani 2008; Larkin 2008; Slaughter 2004). Abstract, mobile citizens have not taken the place of residents tied to land and kin. Exchange continues to be full of friction (Tsing 2005) and impossible to disentangle from social formations. The road remains, as Rudolf Mrázek (2002) writes of colonial Java, a “battlefield,” a space where attempts to consolidate modernity as a project of “smoothness” and “hardness” are plagued by holes, mud, and crashes.

This dissertation advances the idea that such contradictions—between liberal ideologies linking circulation and modernization, and the uneven unfurling and operation of roads in practice—are as visible in contemporary Kenya as they were in the colonial era. Over a century after the first modern networked infrastructures were built, they continue both to be justified by ideologies of progress and modernization, and to produce effects that are variously compliant and opposed to these ideologies. Roads offer a particularly potent example of the social and spatial contradictions of contemporary networked infrastructure. They offer connectivity but also reproduce marginalization; they offer opportunities to generate incomes when the land cannot provide, but are also considered sites where surplus is squandered or lost through risky practices; they create the conditions for frequent engagement with strangers but also for increased investment in ethnicized spatiality; they offer both mobility and radical immobility in the form of accidents and jams. Roads are a site where the state is visibly present in both “developmental” and “policing” modes, and yet also a site of “accidental” injury, death, destruction, and illicit

activity. In this contradictory context, I track the role of roads and road work in generating questions about the conditions of collective life and follow rural residents as they ask—*How do we profit and with what sacrifices?*

The dissertation’s dual focus on the problematics of “accumulation” and “accident” seeks to move beyond the poles which have oriented questions about rural populations:¹⁸ on the one hand, arguments around the resistance of rural worlds to capitalist sociality; and on the other, the presumed inevitability of capitalist formations’ incursion into and re-orientation of rural lives. Instead, I aim to show how the complex ways in which capitalism operates within marginalized spaces.

To this end, the project has three goals, building toward an understanding of the “ethics of risk.” First, to demonstrate the nature of economic practice at the “interface” between the circulations of the highway and emplaced rural lives. This entails considering changes in the nature of land, family, and work—and asking how ethnicity, kinship, and custom are mobilized to manage this interface. In Chapter 3 and 4, I track how truckers, motorcycle riders, brokers, sex workers, and smallholders, among others, straddle the subject positions of “hustler” and “kinsperson,” “farmer” and “entrepreneur,” and renegotiate social obligations and divisions of labor.

¹⁸ I am interested in the themes of accumulation and accident not only because they speak to the often-contradictory presence of roads in contemporary rural Kenya and the ways that rural residents themselves describe these processes, but also because these are keywords that have been at one time or another been central in investigations of collective life and modernity in agrarian spaces. I thus examine them as analytics but also as “problematics”—constellations of concepts and assumptions that shape the way we ask questions. In thinking about how accumulation and loss are represented in rural Kenya today, particularly in contexts highly charged with risk, I examine the transformation in how these ideas are reproduced and transformed in the era of austerity and rural decline.

The second goal is to examine how roads become sites at which rural residents elaborate new ethical subjectivities and explore new forms of value in a “post-agrarian” moment. Through their physical and symbolic operation, as well as their hazards, roads offer the material sites, narrative forms, and spatio-temporal logics that frame the conditions of possibility under which moral and economic value are created. In Chapter 3, for instance, I show how speed becomes an experiential and conceptual site for debating the value of new kinds of transport work; and Chapter 2 demonstrates how both colonial and independence-era investment in roads has produced them materially and symbolically as the means to accumulation and progress, even as they also carry histories of violence and marginalization.

Finally, I aim to understand the role of unexpected misfortune in both developing and challenging these new subjectivities and economic arrangements. As I will explore throughout this dissertation, “accidents” can work to further a project of creating self-reliant, entrepreneurial populations. At other times accidents undermine this project by revealing quite explicitly the limits of what a risk framework can achieve. In quite different ways, Chapters 5 and 6 explore the implications of the fact that road accidents are not always understood to be “accidental.”

In order to unpack these ideas, the remainder of this introduction will situate risk in relation to rural spaces and fiscal austerity. It will first explore my particular approach to risk, in the context of fiscal austerity. Then, it will engage with both older and more recent explorations of the economic practices of the poor. Here, I will consider how the relationship of risk and accumulation has been rewritten in the shift from a peasant studies literature concerned with the transformation of subsistence farming, to a current interest in marginalized populations and their means of “survival.”

II. AUSTERITY AND THE ETHICS OF RISK

When conducting research in western Kenya, I heard a particularly interesting variation on the *majini* or “jinn” stories that are common around East Africa. *Majini* (sing: *jini* from the Arabic *djinn*) are spirits or demons who bring their owners wealth in exchange for blood sacrifice. Addressing anxieties about the obscure mechanisms of material achievement, they are often used to explain road accidents and other untimely death. In Kenya, *majini* are most closely associated with the coastal regions, and in the story I heard there weren’t any in western Kenya until the 1990s. My friend Alfred told me that after the implementation of the austerity programs demanded by the IMF and World Bank’s “structural adjustments,” rural poverty and income anxiety increased. Remittances from urban relatives were also diminished as retrenchments across the public sector weakened safety nets. It was then that some people from Kakamega County in Western Province traveled to the coast to buy *majini*. But they were too inexperienced to feed their devils, and some *majini* ended up escaping. These would find places on the road where they could claim blood for themselves. This, according to Alfred, explained some particularly accident-prone stretches of road in Kakamega.

What I found particularly interesting in this story (besides its unique interpretation of Kenyan geography) was the causal link being drawn between the effects of structural adjustment, the experience of physical vulnerability on the road, and unequal economic accumulation. The use of “occult” idioms for explaining the inequality and increased uncertainty that accompanied neoliberal austerity across Africa has been widely discussed among anthropologists (Comaroff

and Comaroff 1999; Masquelier 2002; Sanders 2008; Smith 2001).¹⁹ But here the phenomenon of majini goes further, offering an account of inexplicable *loss*—in the form of Kenya’s “epidemic” of road accidents. In explaining such personal losses in relation to the uncertainties of accumulation, majini stories produced an understanding of *risk* that transcends the concept’s internal bifurcation between financial and bodily hazard. In this chronology, fiscal shifts which exposed citizens to greater economic risk also created the conditions by which increased bodily hazard in the form of road accidents was introduced into western Kenya: the SAPs explained the otherwise inexplicable frequency of road accidents. In this sense, the story offered, like risk, a concept that “tamed” hazard not by reducing but by naming it (Hacking 1990). At the same time, the story illustrated the way that ideas of risk were embedded in socially narrated experiences of changing worlds.

In what follows, I will briefly discuss how structural adjustment changed the conditions of rural accumulation in Kenya, in particular by expanding the role of entrepreneurial and speculative risk. These economic shifts have generated or enhanced popular ethical concepts around entrepreneurialism as citizens compensate for economic volatility and the state’s retreat from public provision. I will then discuss what the concept of “risk” does and doesn’t offer for an account of rural life in contemporary Kenya.

Austerity

¹⁹ Scholarship on majini in particular has mobilized them as a critique of growing inequality and new forms of wealth. James Smith, for instance, writes that majini are an excellent vehicle for critiquing the commodity fetish because of the way they transform human relations into the by-products of commodity relations “The jini is the epitome of the commodity fetish...a purchased thing which appears to produce wealth out of nothing, which assumes the character of a living being with individualized desires and personality and which produces, as a by-product, an alienated and dehumanized human subject, a slave to the products of his labor” (Smith 2001:432).

Rural decline in Kenya has taken place within the global process that goes by the name “neoliberalism,” a political and economic shift beginning in the 1970s which includes the privatization of public services, economization and marketization of many spheres of life, and the associated creation of “responsible” citizens. Here, I draw on the more focused rubric of austerity for thinking about Kenya’s economic and ideological dispensation in the last three decades; this term best captures the specific logic by which the Kenyan economic and political order was reorganized under the World Bank and IMF-led reforms known as “structural adjustment.” Starting in the late 1980s, the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) forcefully restructured national economies in much of the developing world. These were textbook austerity programs in the sense that they drew on neoclassical economic concepts to argue for an economic restructuring targeted at the reduction of national deficits and at the installation of price as a regulatory mechanism.

Austerity programs around the world have privatized previously public services and infrastructures or subjected state programs to market logics by encouraging fee structures in which the public “participates” by paying. In Kenya, the SAPs of the 1980s and 1990s forced the state to cut back on state spending on programs like welfare, health, education and farm services like irrigation and extension services. This was achieved through reduced allocations, the encouragement of cost-sharing, the promotion of “self-help,” and the large scale retrenchment of public service employees. Attempts to persuade the public that this was necessary argued that “balancing the books” would bring future stability and prosperity—no pain, no gain.²⁰ In the aftermath of the SAPs, Kenya has seen reduced life expectancies, an increase in poverty, and a

²⁰ While Kenyan authorities resisted the restructuring of protectionist commodity marketing, the SAPs nevertheless had a devastating effect on smallholders (Gibbon 1992; Gladwin 1991).

rise in inequality. Several studies argue that while SAPs did not adversely impact everyone, they made women and the lowest socio-economic strata far more vulnerable than before. The majority of the retrenchments of public servants were at the bottom levels. Importantly, in an economy characterized by high dependency, off-farm income that had supplied welfare support through remittances to rural family was undermined exactly at the same time as vulnerable rural families were asked to pay for services that had previously been granted for free.²¹ Similarly, while agricultural profits in Kenya increased after the SAPs, these benefits were largely realized by large agro-businesses, while small-scale farmers were adversely affected (Gibbon 1992; Gladwin 1991; Mkwandawire and Soludo 2003). The SAPs reduced rural extension programs that would have been crucial as reduced soil fertility and climate change ravaged the countryside. Further, SAPs undermined state support for collectives like cooperatives and marketing boards which had hitherto given a degree of protection to smallholders. Many farmers began to seek opportunities elsewhere.²²

As other countries underwent similar processes, a wave of scholarship chronicled the acute and destabilizing effects of structural adjustment alongside global financial crisis (Ferguson 2006; Ferguson 1999; Mbembe and Roitman 1993). The volatility that these authors described through the lens of “crisis” did not pass; rather it settled into the new, “risky,”

²¹ The coincidence of the SAPs with the HIV-AIDS pandemic is an important element of its health consequences, and impact on rural families. The stigma of the disease led to many ailing in urban areas being repatriated to rural spaces for care, adding to the number of dependents on diminishing rural incomes. This care work—mostly performed by female relatives—reduced available farm labour, consumed resources that would otherwise have been spent on inputs, and often demanded the sale of family property to provide funds for extended hospital stays.

²² The structural adjustment programs had multiple intersecting effects which made rural livelihoods more precarious. 1) they reduced remittances from urban areas; 2) in making inputs more expensive they contributed to declining soil fertility and difficulty purchasing fertilizer; 3) they increased education and health costs through cost-sharing and related shifts, at the same time as investment in education became less likely to lead to a wage job; 4) they led to the death or cannibalization of many cooperatives and state agencies that previously allowed collective marketing (getting better prices for farm produce) and economies of scale in purchase of farm inputs; 5) they reduced state spending on rural support programs.

everyday (Knight and Stewart 2016).²³ Importantly, austerity policies “created” risk not only in its popular meaning as hazard or danger, but also in the more specific forms of probabilistic calculation and speculation. That is, they not only made populations more vulnerable to injury and loss, but also produced specific frameworks for understanding that loss. Kristin Peterson (2014) shows how, in the aftermath of austerity in Nigeria, populations moved from being the object of welfare and service provision to appearing as a source of risk. She uses the idea of “risky populations” to describe how citizens were at once exposed to new forms of risk calculation (such as speculation and flexible accumulation); made more vulnerable to volatile markets; and targeted by the state as risky sources of potential violence. Thus besieged, traders and others merged earlier concepts of the fundamental incertitude of the market with neoliberal theories of the self to create a new, more individualized, conception of risk.

Other anthropologists have described how citizens sought to overcome this vulnerability, to re-inscribe it within a new ethics of work and productivity. Laura Bear’s (2015) work on austerity and public debt in India describes how austerity policies rewrote the relationship between the state, spending, and citizens. Bear argues that local populations responded to newly extractive public sector policies by generating a specific “ethics around productivity.” This ethics attempted to restore the “hidden ethical meaning of fiscal policy” and to reimagine productivity in the context of austerity (2015:7). Bear’s attention to the ethical dimensions of austerity resonates with Daniel Mains’s (2012) work on Southern Ethiopia, where he describes how

²³ Pat O’Malley writes that in liberal societies risk is marked by an interesting contradiction. Even as individuals are increasingly expected to purchase their own security, “uncertainty—especially in the form of the free market—is also constituted as necessary to the wellbeing of all” (2004:323). As he explains, self-correcting markets are intended to naturally settle on the “fair price” in such a way that there is no essential nature to price itself. This resembles in interesting ways a pre-actuarial moral attitude toward insurance that held that knowing the specific probability of a loss was immoral and even usurious, and was the equivalent of a gambler knowing the outcome of a throw (Daston 1995).

populations are recruited into contributing their labor to state projects in the name of development. Ethiopians see themselves as performing an important “sacrifice” by participating, without pay, in road building labor. This suggests, intriguingly, that what is called “development” can also feature many of the characteristics of austerity policy—in particular, an extractive orientation toward “human capital” to replace investment in public service (see also Brown 2015; Harvey 2007; Roseman 1996 for accounts suggesting that austerity activates prior conceptions of solidarity and self-sacrifice). In each of these accounts, local populations try to overcome the fractures of late capitalism through a form of “ethical work” in which they reimagine concepts of security, productivity, and progress.

During my research, I perceived this ethical work in progress, most obviously in the growing celebration of entrepreneurship (and even of “hustling,” a somewhat more ambivalent term for the work of making a living under conditions of uncertainty). In western Kenya, for instance, motorcycle taxi riders described themselves with pride as “entrepreneurs.” They explained that not having a wage job meant they were *free*. They preferred their precarious employment contracts because these allowed them the flexibility to invest time and money in agricultural and household projects even as they also worked on the road. These motorcycle taxis were involved in a shocking number of deaths and injuries, were widely stigmatized, and earned daily income. But their capacity to straddle agrarian and mobile occupations, and to coordinate road risk and kin obligations, suggested to me that I needed to think in a more complex way about how vulnerability and success were understood in rural areas. In particular, it helped me to see how communities were debating new kinds of work, value, and danger in the context of changing infrastructural and economic conditions.

In Kenya, austerity has taken a somewhat unusual form, as ongoing privatization of public services in the name of debt reduction is accompanied by unprecedented levels of investment in infrastructure development. Since the early 2000s, Kenya has undertaken massive infrastructure projects, mostly funded by loans taken from international and continental development organizations and from the Chinese government and contractors. Meanwhile, investments in more traditional “welfare” services like health, education, water, and housing have declined as a proportion of the total budget. It is not that the state has ignored evidence of increasing poverty and immiseration; rather, the capacity to borrow for construction has worked alongside ideologically-derived concepts such as public-private partnerships, trickle-down growth, and the “multiplier-effect” to facilitate expansion in infrastructural investment. Turning earlier demands for rural connectivity into a fetish, policy makers claim that this investment in infrastructure changes rural prospects by facilitating the transport of farm produce to markets. I use the concept of “infrastructural self-help” to describe how infrastructure is explicitly constructed as sufficient state contribution toward a growing economy and toward public welfare.²⁴ The idea is not in itself new—“self-help” (*harambee*) was one of the foundational

²⁴ This relationship between infrastructure provision and entrepreneurship is not itself new. In the independence era, the partially liberalized transportation sector was viewed as a “training ground for African entrepreneurs” (as stated in Kenya’s seminal economic policy document, Sessional Paper n. 10 of 1965). However, at that time the coordination of entrepreneurial activities was to be achieved through state planning. The document states, “Surface transportation, outside of the railways, is privately owned and operated through many small enterprises. As such it is proving to be an excellent training ground for African entrepreneurs. Unfortunately, the services provided are varied in standard and quality and frequently are wholly unsatisfactory.”

economic concepts of independent Kenya, which expected citizens to contribute financially and in kind to the work of “development.”²⁵

But, I argue, the current balance between state investments in infrastructure and withdrawals elsewhere has produced a new configuration. One effect of this investment has been to redistribute rural populations toward the roads’ edges, where they have better access to non-agricultural opportunities; another effect has been soaring rates of road accidents. Although in policy documents and in the current “economic blueprint,” Vision 2030, roads are presented only as a mechanism to increase circulation, roads are also a key *worksite* for popular economies. In transport, roadside trade, and even accident salvage, a diverse array of entrepreneurs find roads and roadsides productive sites for work and trade. So roads *do* offer opportunities to make a living. However, these are not the opportunities the state anticipated, and they often expose those engaging in them to high levels of bodily risk.

Thus it is no surprise that it is on the road—where capitalist circulation, popular economies, and bodily risk meet—that I found an ethics of risk being elaborated. In attempts to make the road into a source of economic opportunity, the rural residents I met debated how much and what kinds of risk were appropriate to take on. As I will explore in this dissertation, this ethics was expressed both in relation to the forms of life traditionally understood as “rural”—kinship, community, land—and in practices of calculation and measurement, and representations

²⁵ The idea of “harambee” has its origins in the construction of the East African Railway. The most common claim about the term is that it was a rallying call for indentured workers from the Indian subcontinent to “pull together” on the railway. Hare Ambe here fuses one of the many names of Lord Shiva and his consort Ambe. But most Kenyans would associate it with Kenya’s first president Jomo Kenyatta’s appropriation of it as a rallying call for self-help development. A famous video depicts the old man on a rural road, presidential limousine stuck in mud, calling out “Harambee!” as a collective pulls his vehicle out of the mud. Continuing a colonial practice of making rural areas responsible for their own development, Kenyatta senior’s appropriation created an often oppressive national custom of fundraisers for schools, clinics, cattle dips, and roads. The call persists as a national motto and is included in the state’s coat of arms, placing self-help at the centre of Kenya’s citizen-state relationship.

of speed and direction that conceptually drew on the forms of capitalist circulation. Questions around the road and its “proper use” thus formed the terrain on which ethical constructions competed, with accidents as the limit case that telescoped the conversation into a matter of life and death.

Risk

Risk is a concept as flexible and difficult to pin down as the jini itself. The term can function as a synonym for “hazard” or “danger,” or it can describe the outcome of an actuarial calculation; it can categorize an activity, or depict the conceptual form which draws attention to that activity as a “risk behavior.” François Ewald notes this vagueness and tries, in Kantian terms, to disentangle a specific concept of risk from its wider usage: “the category of risk is a category of the understanding; it cannot be given in sensibility or intuition” (1991:198). My own use of risk is less strict. Here, I distinguish what I mean by risk from its looser meaning as a synonym for hazard, uncertainty, or contingency. But I also distinguish it from its most specific sense, as a calculation about future loss that rests on actuarial analysis.²⁶ I find it somewhere in the middle—what I call “risk” describes an approach to the future that is not strictly statistical but is nevertheless marked by the sense that possibilities of loss and gain *can* and *should* be

²⁶ Risk as we understand it today is a product of (at least) two historical strands: the first is the notion of probability that emerged in the 18th Century in Europe. The recognition that hazards and losses were distributed in patterned ways gave rise to the idea that losses were predictable. The other is the financial management of loss that began with merchant shipping insurance (“risque”), and which produced an idea that peril could be managed through financial compensation, but also that risk was a commodity to be bought and sold. These have merged in contemporary insurance and financial thinking, where probabilistic analysis gives rise to calculations that put a price on peril, and allow it to be globally traded. Thus the concept of risk encompasses both the idea that one can *predict* the likelihood of loss, that one can *manage* that loss by purchasing insurance as protection, and that one can *sell* that likelihood. Some theorists have noted the irony in the fact that, increasingly, the financial institutions that are at the heart of the contemporary experience of risk and uncertainty are the same institutions to which individuals turn to purchase their protection (insurance, pensions, retirement accounts). And, of course, as the global financial crisis revealed, much “risk trading” is often closer to a gamble. (Levy 2012; Patel 2006).

calculated. And calculation, as I will show, is not purely a matter of the “understanding.” It is an entrained response, crafted within a particular occupational world. But before I explore this further, I want to clarify the stakes of using “risk” as a concept for thinking about rural transformation.

The dynamics of advanced “risk societies” (Beck 1992)—in which risk consciousness grows with the development of new technology, even as the ability to actually predict or prevent loss is diminished—are typically presented as quite distinct from the problematics of hazard and uncertainty facing rural, marginalized communities. The unspoken assumption is that late modernity, with its recursive riskiness, is an urban/industrial phenomenon.²⁷ Approaches to contingency in rural communities, especially within African studies, have tended to focus on the social institutions that mediate hazard, in particular kinship, and on occult understandings of causation and misfortune, like witchcraft. While these are important idioms through which experiences of and theories about hazard are expressed (and I will also discuss them), I argue that these are often emphasized at the expense of other risk and risk-management concepts. Present literature may miss the ways in which even marginal rural areas are affected by global political economic and technological shifts that have expanded the role of risk and assessment technologies. (Among other things, automobility is one way in which industrial development reaches rural areas, and introduces the technological violence that factories do elsewhere.)

²⁷ A spatial logic is embedded in the modernization trajectory described by theorists like Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens, even though they don’t discuss risk in spatial terms. Explicitly rural societies are only present in the first (premodern) stage of their trajectory of modernization (Beck 1992; Giddens 1990). This chimes with the work of some early urban theorists, in which the “urban” is defined in part by the presence of risk and contingency which are an important part of what distinguishes the experiential and social dimensions of the urban from rural spaces (de Certeau 2002; Simmel 1950).

The project also moves away from more traditional approaches to risk or precarity among marginalized populations, which perceive risk primarily as something to be “coped with” or as a synonym for vulnerability (see Douglas 1994). Without denying the precarious position of the communities I engage with, I seek a more textured approach to the ways that road hazard is both to be protected against and to be embraced. The hazard of physical and moral injury on the road is very real and often tragic, but road users and road workers also seek to exploit risky scenarios. While road accidents give rise to forms of self- and community-protection, they also allow roadside populations to access otherwise out of reach commodities through salvage and illicit exchange. For employed workers, the fact that road accidents are so common allows them to claim certain rights based on their exposure to risk. Thus rural residents selectively engage risk, and in the process craft particular ethical orientations around profit, loss, individualism, and mutuality. These ethical orientations are emergent and contested—roadside residents promote communitarian norms of caution in one moment and in the next celebrate hazardous feats of selfish accumulation. In focusing on representations of the dangers and rewards of risk, I aim both to offer a fuller picture of what has been termed “the transformation of the countryside,” and to avoid assumptions that moral community in rural spaces is crafted through the *avoidance* of risk or of capitalism itself.

In taking this approach, I do not merely “apply” a risk concept to my fieldwork. Within my fieldsites, I encountered a range of state and NGO discourses that explicitly employed a risk concept. Risk was a central concept in a variety of authoritative discourses—those deployed “against” risk, for example in road safety and HIV-awareness campaigns, as well as those “for” risk, visible in Schumpeter-esque statements that declare entrepreneurial work to be vital for the

advancement of the country. Indeed, Kenya has been marked, as Julie Livingston writes of Botswana, by “intertwining narratives of bodily risk and financial hope (and loss)” (2009:656). Discourses both “against” and “for” risk are mobilized by the Kenyan state as techniques of governance. A national discussion around road accidents, in particular, crystallizes the way that risk operates as a disciplinary discourse. Road safety pronouncements lament driver, pedestrian and even passenger carelessness. They circulate the incantatory statistic that “eighty percent of accidents are caused by human error.” In pushing the idea that road accident victims are at fault for their own deaths, road safety discourse promotes an ethics of responsibility and reminds all citizens that they are the authors of their own fate. As the Chairman of the Motorists Association of Kenya put it, in a remarkable formulation, “Most road users have totally ignored their right to self-regulate. This has led to heavy loss of lives.”²⁸ In this sense, risk discourse participated in a broader neoliberal approach to risk as a means of creating “responsible” subjects.²⁹

These authoritative discourses influenced the way rural residents understood risk. But within this framework, my interlocutors also elaborated understandings of risk. Take for instance a conversation I had with my host in Gaakwen, William. William was a middle-aged man who was a self-declared “hustler.” He had arrived in the truck stop with only a small amount of capital and had built it into multiple businesses and finally into a claim to belonging among the “wenyeji”—local landowners—who maintained a kind of dominion over the truck stop. One day when speaking to him about business, a topic about which he had much to say, he explained to

²⁸ Joe Kiarie. “Move over speed, bad driving habits killing thousands in Kenya.” *Standard Digital*, July 13, 2013. Accessed at <https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/lifestyle/article/2000088233/move-over-speed-bad-driving-habits-killing-thousands>.

²⁹ Numerous scholars have noted that the burden of risk—that is, of the management of hazard—is increasingly being shifted onto the individual under “neoliberal” governance regimes (Baker and Simon 2002; Patel 2006). This shifted burden creates the possibility for “self-determination” via risk-taking, even as it “responsibilizes” subjects and requires that they purchase security and care on the market (Zaloom 2004; O’Malley 2004).

me that each person has his or her own sense of what business was “right” for them. “Mine,” he explained “is transport.” He described how if he met another person also interested in transport they would immediately have much to talk about—discussing the sound of the engine of this or that truck, load capacities, or proposing collaborations on a particular haul. He pointed to a nearby butchery and explained, laughing, that you often saw butchers gathering in groups and debating the finer points of passing cattle, whereas in that conversation he would have nothing to contribute. Interestingly for someone who was raised on a farm and who has lived almost his entire life in a rural space, he insisted that he absolutely could not farm:

You couldn't beg me to farm maize. It can turn into a disaster at any moment...But the farmer has made up his mind to risk. He waits till September when it's harvest time, he farms, he adds pesticide, he burns the grass, he hoes, he weeds, he harvests, he stores it and waits for the market. Then weevils come. So now you have to treat the maize again. *Then* you find the market is flooded and the price is ruined. And you don't have anywhere to store the maize. You see? But that man doesn't see the problems I see because he's in that business. He says: I put in this work, I sell my crop for this much, I get this much. But *I* just see the risks. And when he looks at *my* work, he sees the risk. He thinks of the man he saw who bought a vehicle and it crashed and now his five million shillings is scrap....He doesn't see my profit and I don't see his profit. Everyone sees the losses and challenges the other person goes through.

Speaking in Kiswahili, William used the word “risk” in English (as well as “disaster,” “profit,” “losses” and “challenges”). His statement about farming was consistent with many others I heard —“risk” as a concept is never far from discussions of cash crop farming, perhaps because the farm is the site at which many Kenyans first experienced their exposure to the market in those terms (selling their labor didn't expose them to the uncertainty of markets in quite the same way). But William's assessment of risk was interesting because it suggested that people generated a calculative disposition around their particular occupation that trained them to

anticipate, understand and withstand *its* losses (not all losses) in the pursuit of profit. Risk calculation here is not an abstract technology: it is one embedded in the distinct sensibility of a particular occupation in a specific context. More, it entrains the risk-taker into a kind of resilience, an ability to see beyond loss.

Others echoed this sentiment that people are entrained into risk. But this entrainment does not always produce the desired results, and this helps us to see the fine line between “risk” and “danger.” Take another example, also from Gaakwen. I was good friends with Evans, a welder from the Nyanza region who worked in truck repair and in accident rescue (using his welding skills to free bodies trapped in crushed vehicle cabin). (He also had a side business selling what were called “Nigerian gates,” gilded and elaborately wrought.) One day we were sitting with a few others and discussing a recent accident in which a truck driver whose brakes failed on the way down the Sachangwan hill had deliberately crashed into another truck that was parked along the road. The gathering explained this in terms that sounded very much like an elaboration of the “trolley problem.”³⁰ They said that the driver chose to bring his truck to a stop by running into another truck in order to avoid an oncoming bus full of passengers. He was successful, but he also set in motion a chain of events in which a toppled container crushed a young mechanic who was working under another parked truck. While lauding the truck driver for having saved lives, the gathering argued that the *bus* driver bore the blame because he had been “stubborn”. This driver had been informed that an out-of-control truck (called a *mnyama*, “beast,” in Gaakwen slang) was coming down the hill. Rather than stop, he chose to take his chances on the risky stretch anyway. Evans ended the story by describing how drivers might miscalibrate the risks of

³⁰ The trolley problem is an ethics experiment in which one can choose to either allow a runaway trolley to hit five people tied to the track, or pull a lever and thereby kill a single person on another track.

the road. He said that drivers *think* they are engaging in calculated risks but “sometimes they forget to apply the ‘order of operations.’”³¹ That is, they *do* calculate, but not always correctly.

A persistent critique of thinking through “risk” in spaces where actuarial calculation has not fully penetrated everyday life (like Kenya) is that the risk concept applies Western visions of morality and conduct to societies with other approaches to hazard and harm (Boholm 2001; Bujra 2000). The “risk” framework, these authors argue, presumes an individualized calculative disposition, whereas responses to uncertainty might in fact take other forms. In attending to calculative dispositions, I do not presume the calculating subject but rather show how particular dispositions were actively cultivated in my research sites. However, the work of calculation was not only a mental operation—it was also a habitus produced in the context of a particular field of action (Bourdieu 1977). Therefore, I understand risk calculation as a form of bodily and mental discipline, one which is shaped by, but not isomorphic with, the way that actuarial risk calculation produces risk probabilities. I believe an attention to the entrained dimensions of risk calculation bridges a divide in the risk scholarship between scholars interested in the rise of probability and its effect on social understandings of the future, and those interested in how risk ideologies produce “responsibilized” subjects. How, precisely, does a person—or, for that matter, a community—*learn* to be a calculating subject? Attention to the mental and physical discipline of risk takers on the roads shows how a fiscal ideology that prizes risk calculations takes form in individuals and communities, and how it comes to actually shape their actions and choices. More broadly, it helps us see that economic practice is both bodily and reasoned.

³¹ In fact he said, “they forget to use BODMAS.” This is an acronym for order of operations: Brackets, Orders, Division and Multiplication, and Addition and Subtraction (in the U.S. the acronym is PEMDAS).

How, then, does the road shape an “ethics of risk”? I think about this in two ways. First, I think through the particular conjunction of bodily risk and entrepreneurial risk that is visible on the road. Cash crop farming may have shaped experiences and understandings of entrepreneurial and market risk in Kenya, but road risk merges economic with physical hazard in a way that farming did not. While risk theorists have often elided the material experience of destruction, injury, and death in focusing instead on technologies of prediction and compensation, I propose that the specifics of loss are what makes risk palpable to those who seek to calculate it. Thus different forms of loss will also give rise to different understandings of risk, and shape the tolerances of those who engage with it for profit.

Second, I focus on the material and metaphorical resources with which concepts of risk (and accident) are constructed. Jonathan Levy points out how, in the 19th-century United States, maritime metaphors for risk shaped legal analysis of workplace accidents in such a way that employers were not made liable for workplace risk faced by their employees.³² In Kenya, both HIV and the independence-era figure of the farmer-entrepreneur have shaped constructions of risk in ways that are consequential for communities allocating responsibility for injury. But the road has also begun to provide its own metaphors for understanding risk. This is visible for instance in the concept of “road shillings”—money which is hyper mobile and thus easily lost, or of “rush”—a mode of action that is likely to lead to harm. Here, I explore how and with what

³² In a seminal 1893 case, the court used an analogy with the shipping captain to understand the railway worker as the “owner” of his risk. This allowed courts to undo a principle in which the master was liable for the injuries of the servant, thus moving to an individuated concept of *risk* and away from an idea of hazard in which “the burden of hazard was held in common” (Levy 2012:12). Levy points out that the court distinguished between risk and peril. This understanding of liability was to evolve over time, but it nevertheless shaped a concept of “freedom” in which the worker was both “free” to sell their labor and responsible for their own risk.

consequences the road as a material and symbolic form shapes ideas of progress, value, and harm.

Because my work is situated among precarious populations and deals with the social experience of hazard and death, it is important that I distinguish it from studies of “precarity” and “survival economies.” To that end, the next section situates my own research in relation to the way risk is addressed in some contemporary literatures on “making do.” In the process, I also describe an ongoing shift within anthropology away from peasant studies and toward urban “survival,” and articulate what may be getting left behind in that shift.

III. RISK AND THE ‘SURVIVAL ECONOMY’

Thirty years ago James Scott proposed a normative framework for understanding peasant economies centered around the concept of a “subsistence ethic” (Scott 1977). He argued that peasants exploited by capital and the colonial state, and whose margins of return were only very slightly above what was needed for basic subsistence, would be risk averse. Given the option to risk losses in the pursuit of higher returns (using, for instance, higher-yielding seed), they would take the safer bet. Arguing against theories which understood this attitude as evidence of the insufficient modernization of the peasantry, Scott argued that this was a perfectly rational thing to do. Peasants were simply calculating in a different way (according to what was *left* rather than what was *taken*), and calculating with an eye toward the preservation of shared norms. Their calculations were therefore not only rational, they were also moral.

The debates Scott was involved in seem dated today. But the terms on which he centered his argument: subsistence, risk, and ethics/morality have re-emerged in light of a contemporary interest in precarity and associated ethical subjectivities. In the wake of austerity reforms and subsequent “crisis,” something reminiscent of his focus on a “subsistence ethic” has reappeared in writing that attends to the morally-charged rhetoric of “surviving,” “hustling,” or “getting by and making do” (De Boeck 2015a; Mbembe and Roitman 1993; Newell 2009; Peterson 2014; Simone 2004; Watson 2009). Scholars, now largely focused on urban spaces, have returned to these categories to portray a situation in which the present is saturated with risk and uncertainty. As “subsistence ethics” has given way to “survival ethics,” however, survival no longer describes a risk-averse way of being but one that is fully permeated by risk in both its entrepreneurial and precarious guises.³³

The notion of “survival” seems to crop up everywhere in Africanist urban studies—as a term imported from the communities under study, but also as an analytic. Vanessa Watson, for instance, contrasts the “techno-managerial rationality” of urban planners with the “survival rationality” of populations in the Global South, in order to argue that planning must work at the “interface” between these rationalities (Watson 2009). Watson, like many scholars interested in “survival,” takes the idea to refer to “the every-day lives of a marginalized and impoverished urban population surviving largely under conditions of informality” (2009: 2260). While

³³ This is not a reversal of Scott’s argument--the kind of risk these scholars point out does not constitute a return to neoclassical economics around profit maximization. Rather, it preserves Scott’s sense that populations living at subsistence level (with their necks just above the water) are primarily focused on preserving their ability to survive. However, the “ethics” here no longer refers to the community norms or methods of calculation that marginalized populations preserve in order to avoid perishing. Rather, for these scholars “survival ethics” is a category that replaces politics. (Ethics plays something of this role in Scott’s work, where he argues that when the subsistence ethic is respected by landowners, peasants will not rebel. However, in Scott’s work both ethics *and* politics are possible modes of action for the communities he is studying, whereas in the ‘survival ethics’ literature, the replacement of politics by ethics is a judgment made by the observer.)

attempts to describe urban life through the “survival efforts” of the poor capture important aspects of the contemporary experience of crisis in post-austerity states, the consequence of this framing is that they turn away from an analysis of the forces structuring economic and social practices and instead employ a more descriptive emphasis on unstructured uncertainty and precarity. Thus, they take “survival” at face value, as a matter of fulfilling necessities, rather than as a historically-conditioned discourse.

An exception I have found useful is Jeremy Jones’s (2010) discussion of “zigzag” economies in Zimbabwe. Describing Zimbabweans’ distinction between “straight” and “zigzag” as a tension between regular and irregular economic practices, Jones interprets “survival” as a *licensing discourse* rather than a matter of basic biological necessity. When people speak of “surviving,” he argues, they self-consciously suspend proper ways of acting and authorize impropriety through reference to an “exceptional” or crisis situation. This resonates with my research sites, where discussions of economic activity move between emphasizing the need to “be straightforward”—an ethical injunction to do things the *right* way, in accordance with “tradition,” Christian mores, developmental values, and the law—and celebrating a competing mode of action, often referred to as “hustling” or glossed as “doing what you have to do to survive.” As Jones writes, survival appears to be less an “adjunct to bare life” than a product of a particular historical conjuncture (Jones 2010:286). My own ethnographic research suggests that in Kenya this conjuncture is marked by a liberal emphasis on self-sufficiency, and by a widespread experience of crisis following austerity. Understanding survival as a historically contingent discourse is essential, I argue, because it allows the ethnographic examination of ideas

cast in the language of “survival” while also exploring ethical frameworks that the concept of “bare necessity” might foreclose.

Hannah Arendt famously argued that that poverty and necessity were not valid objects of political action, and that resistance must separate the realms of the political and the economic (1965). Much of the urbanist literature in the “survival” genre demonstrates an unresolved discomfort around this distinction. Veena Das and Shalini Randeria write in introducing a series of articles on urban precarity that they do not wish to replicate Arendt’s claim that the poor are so caught up in necessity that they cannot exercise the freedom necessary for political action (2015:4); but their intervention is necessary precisely because scholars seem to find it difficult to at once acknowledge the difficulties of making a living among the urban poor, and make strong claims about the possibilities of robust political and ethical action. This is visible in myriad attempts to describe the specificity of political strategies among those who are marginalized, often with revisions to the concept of resistance.³⁴ These scholars tend to resolve their discomfort by expanding the meaning of “politics” rather than by examining the construction of the idea of “necessity.”³⁵ This is not to discount the value of this work as accounts of the challenge of living in contemporary urban regimes which enlarge the aspirations of the poor even as they also make

³⁴ This is notable in the enthusiastic adoption within urban studies of Chatterjee’s concept of “political society” and Asaf Bayat’s notion of the “quiet encroachment of the ordinary,” in particular. Both of these are compelling texts that question dominant formulations of resistance and question how we might understand agency under contemporary conditions of governance. The way in which they have saturated postcolonial urban studies literature is telling, however, of a wider search for a new understanding of politics.

³⁵ A notable exception to this is Kalyan Sanyal’s work. In *Rethinking Capitalist Development*, he proposes a distinction between the “need economy” (participants in which, even when they accumulate, do not systematically orient their accumulation toward the production of surplus value) and “capitalist production,” in which labor, production, and exchange are organized around the creation of surplus value. In Sanyal’s account, the “need economy” resembles the “subsistence economy” posited by peasant studies as a production system that is overwhelmed by cash crop production. Participants in the need economy may accumulate a surplus, but they are unable to make that surplus work on its own. Sanyal argues that this is not an intersection of capitalist and pre-capitalist formations, nor of an “inside” and an “outside”: rather, “what we have now is capitalism with an inherent heterogeneity” (Sanyal cf. Gidwani & Wainwright 2014:42).

accumulation ever more difficult for them. Indeed, I draw on the insights of scholars like Abdou Maliq Simone and Filip de Boeck around the rhythmic and spatial practices of making do in urban spaces (Simone 2005; De Boeck 2015b). However, the current emphasis on provisionality and uncertainty, and the focus on *failures* to accumulate rather than on the practices and styles of accumulation, seems to me to have let go of important questions around capitalism itself: namely, how it reproduces accumulative desires and practices even in marginalized spaces.³⁶

Which brings me back to the question of (profit) margins. What has dropped out of the conversation in the shift from “subsistence” to “survival” (and from the peasant to the urban poor) is the careful analysis of the practices and meanings of accumulation that was one of the central contributions of the peasant studies moment. Scott’s work was part of a wider interest among anthropologists in the interactions of capitalist and non-capitalist economic practices. This work brought together an examination of shifting forms of production and exchange, with a capacious approach to the way that meaning is made at the interface of different material and symbolic orders. The conjuncture could generate unexpected resonances, like the meaningful convergence of blood and money in South Africa, initially linked by an accidental acoustic correlation (Comaroff 1985; Morris 2010); or the incorporation of the back of a pickup truck as a new standard measure in Yoruba bargaining systems (Guyer 1998); or the way that cattle served as a kind of retirement insurance for migrant laborers in Lesotho (Ferguson 1994). As part of their investigation into the ways that marginalization was created or reoriented through the insertion of the peasant into dominant economies—both indigenous and international—the

³⁶ Filip de Boeck’s work is consistently an exception to this, as his essays often not only move between urban and rural spaces, but also examine both accumulation and dispossession at multiple scales. This point is also somewhat contradicted by the critical urbanist / political ecology literature which analyzes the urban as the site and form of uneven capitalist accumulation.

anthropologists influenced by peasant studies didn't only focus on how people were "getting by" but also, as Sara Berry puts it, on how they were "getting ahead."³⁷ And because of the wider interest in how class differentiation developed within the peasantry (captured in the debates around the "agrarian question"³⁸), peasant studies offered anthropologists an opportunity to track the *trajectories* of agrarian producers by examining whether they produced a surplus and if so, how it was used. In tracing out these trajectories, anthropologists and others drew attention to the way that both meanings and social attachments inevitably threw theory off track. For instance, the participants in the "Nairobi Debate" on the agrarian question in Kenya examined "the accumulative tendencies" of the peasantry but noted that state and ethnic factors, as well as both non-propertarian and hyper-propertarian relationships to land, often produced outcomes quite different from those proposed by Marxist-Leninist theory.³⁹ Finally, theorists asked how one might frame the articulation between capitalist and non-capitalist production: as interface, conjuncture, frontier, articulation, or mosaic (Berry 1993; Chalfin 2004; Comaroff 1985; Guyer 1998).

These debates are important, I argue, because accumulation—and ideas about its morality, its durability, its calculability, its measurement—remains an important domain of

³⁷ Sara Berry's (1985) work exemplifies a trend of moving away from a focus on subsistence. Because colonial policy and practice tended to protect Yoruba access to land and labor, she argues, most Yoruba were not compelled to work for wages in order to subsist. People sought employment as a means to future accumulation rather than survival.

³⁸ Lenin argued that the "middle peasant"—the subsistence producer—would disappear as some peasants grew richer and developed toward petty capitalism while others were impoverished and forced into wage labor. This was debated by Kautsky and others, who asked how a capitalist mode of production could co-exist with pre-capitalist social relations of production, in particular in agrarian spaces (see Kautsky 1899; Laclau 1970).

³⁹ The participants in the "Nairobi Debate" were particularly interested in peasant class formation under colonialism and after (Kitching 1980; Ng'ang'a 1981; Njonjo 1981; Nyong'o 1981a; Nyong'o 1981b). They debated a variety of questions in relation to this, including questions around who could be called a "peasant" (only those who produced a surplus for sale, or any small-scale subsistence farmer?); what constituted proletarianization (could one maintain a farm alongside wage labor and still be a proletariat?); about whether land ownership is a form petty capitalism; about what could be called a "surplus"; and about the meaning of land itself (how to incorporate land's meaning as something other than a means of production into a Marxist analysis).

meaning-making at the “frontier” (Chalfin 2004) of internationally-capitalized economies and communities that are unevenly incorporated into capitalist production. This uncertain relationship to capitalist development is what I believe is described in the language of “survival” or “hustling”—terms which express how contingent access to the means of reproduction can be. But an attention to accumulation reveals that even in spaces of high physical risk, the discourse of survival refers to something other than the protection of one’s body or the fulfillment of its basic needs. As scholars from Marx to Bourdieu and Meillassoux have pointed out, reproduction is more complex than corporeal endurance—thus survival actually describes the deployment of a range of strategies for securing a situation in which a future can be imagined. This future may be described as marriage, plot, children (and children’s education). Given that people sometimes describe themselves as willing to sacrifice their own lives for the achievement of these goals,⁴⁰ it is clear that survival refers to something other than life and death.

Thus, I argue that in contrast to the way in which it is usually understood, the language of “survival” actually operates as an examination of “surplus.” It is a means of feeling out one’s relationship to accumulation and its trajectories in the context of austerity-era uncertainty. And of asking, in that context, what is and is not acceptable to do. This is visible, for instance, in motorcycle taxi riders’ acute attention to the way that accumulation can move from simple aggregation to reproductive potential through the mediation of both savings groups and investment; and debates about whether value is created through individualistic feats of virtuosic

⁴⁰ I discuss this in more detail in Chapters Two and Three, but as a brief illustration I will recount a friend’s recent comment. Discussing which of two brothers should be the one to travel to South Sudan (a high risk area) to find work and support the household, he pointed out that the older of them was married with children and the younger was not yet married. The one who should do the risky job, he argued, was the older one, because even if he died, he would be leaving something behind. The younger had not yet had the opportunity to set up a life, and should be spared. It is clear here that what “life” means is something other than physical endurance.

accumulation (“hustling”) or through practices that, in Nancy Munn’s terms, “ensure community viability” (Munn 1986).

In sum, my interest in ethics moves away from “survival ethics” and its origins in the theories around the concepts of precarity and precariousness.⁴¹ Without discounting the profound exhaustion that can be produced by simply making it through the day for those who live at the margins of capitalism (Povinelli 2011), I move away from an ethics framed in terms of life and death to instead investigate collective norms (both conceptual and practical) that are generated in the process of making life under difficult conditions.

I’ve engaged at length with the discourse of survival for several reasons, not least of which is that my research on road risk often engages directly with life and death, and I therefore need to be careful to distinguish the discourse of “survival” from the very real possibility of death on or alongside the road. In the context I describe, the ethical formations generated around road work do not have life and death as their horizon—even when discussed in the language of “surviving.” I approach this from two perspectives, drawn from my ethnographic material. First, I argue that attention to life after death suggests that death is not the limit to life. One thing that a reading of “survival” as a discourse of bare necessity ignores is the extreme productivity of death as well as the potential for ongoing action *after* death. The spirits of the dead do substantial

⁴¹ Precarity theory, which draws on Judith Butler’s attention to human vulnerability as a grounds for universalist ethics (2006), establishes human precariousness as the basis of an ethical commitment to equality. Butler’s precarity ethics, elaborated in the context of her opposition to interventionist warfare, is often conflated with a literature on economic precarity in the neoliberal era to produce a theory of precarity that installs “bare survival” as the horizon of politics. For instance, a recent article on precarity theory rejects the optimism of Hardt and Negri’s focus on joy and revolution by stating that sometimes political expression is made impossible by the simple work of getting through the day: “Put simply, it is possible that *survival takes the place of living* (let alone protest) for vast multitudes of subjects for various psychic and systemic reasons” (Cooper 2016: 5, my emphasis). The conflation of these two, quite different, notions of precarity helps to understand why paying attention to the “survival efforts” of the marginalized has come to appear as itself an ethical position (as against an Arendtian commitment to “freedom” or revolutionary politics).

ethical work in rural Kenya.⁴² I discuss this in more detail in Chapter 4, in relation to conversations around the actions of spirits in Western Kenya. What becomes apparent is that ethics have to do with how one negotiates between obligations and material constraints to treat both kin and outsiders. Thus I draw less on a precarity ethics organized around corporeal vulnerability, and more on scholarship on “post-Fordism” that draws attention to the way that populations around the world have not only lost material stability in the present, but also the promise of a “relatively predictable futurity” (Muehlebach 2013: 297).

Second, I view “survival” not as a discourse that should be understood in terms of life and death, but rather as an economic orientation that positions its subject in a specific relation to dominant regimes. The opposite of “surviving,” for those among whom I did research, is not death but rather what they called “being straightforward.” Being straightforward refers to what de Certeau might term “the proper,” doing things according to established norm. Surviving, by contrast, is the realm of tactics rather than strategies, of opportunities seized “on the wing”; it refers to emergent possibilities. But I argue that positing this distinction is not in itself a sufficient analysis. My ethnographic material suggests that there is a patterned specificity to forms and styles of accumulation in marginal economies, and I seek to articulate some these patterns. In Chapter 5, for instance, I discuss the way that roadside economies are organized around the concept of *remainder*: illicit economic gains are both calculated and justified in terms of, as Scott would put it, “what is *left* rather than what is taken.” This reflects a wider economic orientation in post-austerity Kenya, one in which “marginal gains” (Guyer 2004) have become central to the work of making lives. If rural areas once provided supplements to emerging

⁴² Though the spirits of the dead play a far greater role in one of my sites than the other, a differentiation which speaks to the ongoing relevance of place in describing both ethical and material possibilities.

capitalist centers, they now survive on (or at least perceive themselves as surviving on) the leakages and “leftovers” of dominant economies.

Thus, I view the language of “survival” as part of a popular ethics around accumulation. It is a discourse which aims to legitimize the kinds of activities that don’t fit easily into existing norms. It does so by referring to one’s own marginalization, thus establishing the necessity of non-normative action. Within this dissertation, I track a range of associated economic-ethical concepts, like that of remainder, which similarly construct an ethics around the fact of marginalization itself. Unlike classic descriptions of the “moral economy,” however, which rely on the opposition of pre-capitalist and capitalist moral structures (Thompson 1993), the popular ethics I describe often relies on the language of capitalism itself—in particular, on a claim to rights that are established through engagement with risk.

The challenge of this dissertation, then, is to consider an ethics of risk alongside the ways that histories of colonial and postcolonial policy have constructed the “rural”: as both a space of stability and supplementary production (one supposedly isolated from late capitalist “risk”) and a marginalized or parasitical (“risky”) space which inhibits the full development of accumulative tendencies in the center. What visions of productivity, belonging, and value are generated in such a space, particularly at the tail end of a long period of agricultural decline? What role might kinship and land play in entrepreneurial or speculative imaginations, when these are said to both inhibit modernization and protect residents from its harms? Following the long life of “moral economies,” how might we understand norms that at once entrench marginalization and leave room for action within it? These questions require me to critically interrogate the categories that

have traditionally been associated with rural spaces even as I also examine the shifting conditions of roadside life.

Although this dissertation is inspired by agrarian political economy, it does not proceed on the same evidentiary terrain. Rather, it draws on the problematics of agrarian studies—especially the interest in the imbrication of non-dominant regimes of accumulation with dominant systems—to help understand an imaginative formation around economic activity and ethical action in today’s rural Kenya. What I seek to uncover is something like a “structure of feeling” (Williams 1977)—an emergent practical consciousness, a form of “feeling and thinking” which is both social and material. I do not rely on household surveys or development statistics but on stories, rumors, and fragmented and mobile observations. These offer an account of the experiential conditions of changing rural life in ways that resist descriptive abstraction. As public and scholarly attention shifts toward cities, declaring that “the world is now urban,” I wish to linger in the times and spaces of the rural, in order to ask what these are and what they are becoming both in relation to the urban and on their own terms.

BLACK SPOTS

Chapter 2

The road was endless. One road led to a thousand others, which in turn fed into paths, which fed into dirt tracks, which became streets, which ended in avenues and cul-de-sacs. All around, a new world was being erected amidst the old. Skyscrapers stood high and inscrutable beside huts and zinc abodes. Bridges were being built; flyovers, half finished, were like passageways into the air, or like future visions of a time when cars would be able to fly. Roads, half-constructed, were crowded with heavy machinery.

- Ben Okri, *The Famished Road*

I. SHIMALABANDU AND GAAKWEN

This chapter locates my research sites within a history of infrastructural development in Kenya, which has materially and symbolically produced roads as the means to accumulation and progress. I argue here that the “the rural” as a concept is created in relation to infrastructural development, even as I also show that interlinked histories of infrastructure and settlement have produced quite different kinds of spaces within the rural. I explore a longstanding ambivalence around roads as symbolic instantiations of both the benefits and the perils of development, but also as sites where social and economic subjectivities were forged through histories of labor and mobility. These ideas situate my research sites, Shimalabandu and Gaakwen, and the core concept-metaphor of the “black spot.”

My account is focused around two rural roadside communities located at the accident-prone stretches of road known as “black spots.” These roadside communities, one a cluster of

villages surrounding a small shopping center in Western Kenya, the other a bustling truck stop in Kenya's Rift Valley, differ in important ways. But each is a node at which highway infrastructure interfaces with a rural community, thus offering insight into the social, spatial, ethical, and economic re-configurations that take place at spaces of encounter between the rural “hinterland” and large-scale infrastructure systems. I look at these black spots, sites of concentrated road risk, in order to understand the durable ways that communities seek to make the road into a resource. I also draw on them to investigate how persistent engagement with road hazard has shaped the interaction of the road and the roadside. At black spots, I will argue, we can see how material infrastructures, theories of contingency, and economic aspirations interact.

During the first part of my twenty-two months of fieldwork on roads and accidents, I was based in Nairobi. As my fieldwork progressed, I was increasingly drawn to two sites which repeatedly came up in conversation as notorious accident sites. The truck stop of Gaakwen is infamous throughout East Africa as an accident black spot. And I was intrigued by the fact that the village of Shimalabandu carried its reputation in its name, which translates as “place that kills people.” I ultimately lived in and around these sites in 2013 and 2014, making both extended and shorter visits. I have also returned each year since to visit. Most of the ethnographic material in this dissertation comes from these stays, but I also draw on notes from the many journeys I took along the highways that pass by Shimalabandu and Gaakwen; on interviews that took place in Nairobi, Nakuru, and Kakamega towns; and on archival research in both Nairobi and western Kenya.

The first site, Shimalabandu, is located along a relatively sleepy section of Kenya’s main North-South highway, the A1. This is an international highway linking the Tanzanian border to

the border with South Sudan in the north. Its name, “place that kills people,” derives from the road accidents that have taken place along the stretch of road that passes the shopping center. Residents trace these accidents back to an originary accident that happened sometime in the 1950s, leaving behind unsettled spirits that continue to cause harm. Shimalabandu’s nearest urban centre is Kakamega town, an important county seat and before 2010 the provincial capital of Western Province. The village is undergoing a process of urbanization as land fragmentation, diminishing agricultural productivity and rising land values facilitate the conversion of roadside land near to real estate.

The second site, Gaakwen, is a busy truck stop located along East Africa’s main commodity transport corridor, the Mombasa-Malaba highway (A104/A109). This is Kenya’s main east-west highway, and connects the Eastern Congo, South Sudan, Rwanda and Uganda to the Indian Ocean port of Mombasa. It is also a part of the Trans-Africa Highway connecting Mombasa to Douala. Gaakwen is notoriously “risky:” it is known as a site of frequent, spectacular accidents; as a dispersal point for the transmission chains that brought HIV into Kenya; and as a locus for all kinds of illicit trade, particularly in siphoned fuel and stolen cargo. Like Shimalabandu, it is also a space in transition—the truck stop grew up in the 1990s on what had been farmland, and is rapidly transforming into a township. Gaakwen is celebrated as a place where the quick circulation of truckers’ money offers commercial opportunities to entrepreneurs from the surrounding rural areas.

Shimalabandu and Gaakwen are undergoing similar processes, as their agricultural economies are rapidly being displaced by small-scale trade and land speculation. One Shimalabandu resident told me that the village is becoming “like town,” because of the

availability of casual work and access to regular cash; while Gaakwen's reputation as a growing township draws traders (both buyers and sellers) from surrounding hinterlands. But these sites are also interesting for comparison because they represent different *kinds* of rural. That is, while both are agricultural spaces in transition, they were historically integrated in different ways into the historical and economic processes that have shaped what it means to be rural in Kenya. This difference is linked to the spatial segregation that underpinned colonial and postcolonial regimes of accumulation, first when local populations were settled on "native reserves" in order to make large tracts of agricultural land available for the White Highlands and the state, and later when these patterns were partially undone in the post-independence resettlement programs. Drawing on terms that are widespread in Kenya, I describe these different rurals as "risaf" (reserve) and "scheme" (settlement scheme).⁴³ The difference is significant because "risaf" and "scheme" relate in somewhat different ways to changing household and occupational life, and have historically different relationships to the all-consuming question of land. In this dissertation, then, the rural is not merely defined in opposition to the urban. Rather, I argue that attention to the variability and similarities of different rural spaces challenges our taxonomy of space.

Shimalabandu is located in an area that was the North Kavirondo native reserve before becoming Western Province. Provinces ceased to exist as administrative and legal units in 2010, but this wider area is still referred to as "Western" and identified as the ethnic homeland of the

⁴³ This is a rubric for describing a broad differentiation. Kenya's regions underwent substantially different experiences of colonialism, and land alienation was more disruptive in the central and southern Rift Valley than in Western Kenya. Although there were settler farms in northern and eastern Kakamega, they did not extend beyond the forest. Instead, western Kenya's high pre-colonial population density led to Luhya settlement on lands they did not have ancestral claims to. Western Kenya is currently the region of Kenya with the highest rural population density (particularly in Maragoli, Vihiga County, which has among the highest rural population densities in the world).

Luhya.⁴⁴ The reserves were established around particular ethnicities (as determined and organized by the colonial government), and the North Kavirondo reserve was for the groups called “Luyia” or “Luhya.” Even today many residents claim ancestral and/or ethnic ties to the land they presently occupy. They are related to their neighbors, are members of the same clan as others in their larger location, and share in cultural ceremonies like circumcision. “Reserve,” or *risaf* in my transliteration,⁴⁵ therefore continues to be used as a term describing a particular vision of rural space: to call a place *risaf* is to say that it is a place defined by ethnic community and solidarity, by the dominance of “custom,” by agricultural land uses, and by a certain ideal of non-modernity. *Risaf* is a term used both by urban residents to describe their rural places of origin—places to which they return for ceremonies and funerals—and by rural residents to describe their perceived lack of development. Another word for this kind of place is “home.”⁴⁶

In contrast, Gaakwen is located in the former White Highlands, one of the parts of Kenya where settler colonialism claimed large tracts of land. Colonial estates displaced the pastoralist and semi-pastoralist Kalenjin and Maasai and the traces of this displacement are spatially and affectively present. On one side of the highway, Gaakwen abuts large farms owned by the descendants of former settlers, by the super wealthy politically elites of Kenya’s post-independence, and by multinational corporations related to these factions. On the other side, it is surrounded by the patchwork formation typical of “settlement schemes,” the land-buying

⁴⁴ What used to be Western Province is now four counties: Kakamega, Vihiga, Bungoma, and Busia. Kakamega town was the provincial capital and continues to be the biggest town in the four counties. Throughout the dissertation I refer to this area as “western Kenya.” This sometimes includes the former Nyanza Province (what were the Central and Southern Kavirondo Reserves in the colonial period) in addition to the former Western Province.

⁴⁵ I use the different spellings “reserve” and “risaf” (my transliteration of the pronunciation of “reserve” in Kiswahili) to distinguish between the historically specific ‘native reserves’ and the contemporary use of “risaf” to refer to certain kinds of rural areas. See Chapter 3 for a more in-depth discussion.

⁴⁶ This is the general picture. The colonial experience led to minor population shifts even inside the reserves. Whereas the majority of Shimalabandu’s residents were displaced a short distance to make room for the provincial capital, one of its villages is a settlement of Maragoli (also part of the Luhya) who migrated in from further south.

programs that facilitated a “smooth” transition to independence by helping smallholder farmers buy out settlers (at inflated prices). Resettlement as a policy was intended to deal at once with the problem of landlessness, with squatters, and with settler resistance to the economic imperatives of independence. The politics of the compromise both managed to make peasants finance the transition and created the conditions for significant, and ongoing, contestation over land ownership and use. Schemes are by definition occupied by people who do not claim an ancestral tie to the specific plot of land they occupy.⁴⁷ Neighbors, even when sharing ethnicity, are seldom related to one another in the way they would be in former reserves. Nevertheless, in the context of political histories that have led to ethnic competition over land and resources in the Rift Valley, Gaakwen is “claimed” as Kalenjin (specifically, Kipsigis) territory.

Shimalabandu and Gaakwen are each located along major highways. While Gaakwen’s stretch of highway is much busier than Shimalabandu’s, neither of these sites is remote. Each is easily accessible along tarmac roads. Indeed, each of these sites operates a kind of threshold between the highway and the rural hinterland. Much like the spaces that Jane Guyer calls “niches,”⁴⁸ I argue that these are spaces where different regimes of production and circulation come together. However, by constructing them as rural in different ways, their divergent histories have had specific influences on the ways in which road-based regimes rub against and are integrated into rural life. Following in a tradition of Africanist political economy, I suggest that

⁴⁷ This is the case even though general claims to territory are made by groups whose precolonial life was less sedentary and more spatially fluid, and whose land tenure systems before colonial land alienation did not have the specificity that would justify those claims under presently settled understandings of land ownership.

⁴⁸ The term “black spots” chimes felicitously with the way Jane Guyer refers to niches as “black holes in the mosaic.” As she writes in *An African Niche Economy*, “The domination of national and world orders in Africa is an extraordinarily complex and aleatory process that has created institutional gaps and logical hiatuses...that describe a social mosaic more internally complex than any imagery of interstices or margins can adequately express.” For Guyer, the “black holes” in the mosaic are the spaces where indigenously generated innovations meet wider economic processes to create “niches.”

these sites can be ethnographically examined as both spatial and historical “conjunctures of material conditions and social relations” (Berry 1985; Hill 1970). The conjuncture is shaped by specific histories of land access, labor relations, and custom, but also by the mobility of the road, with its circulation, strangers, and accidents. And it leads me to see the “black spot” as more than an accident-prone site.

The “black spot” operates here as an analytic for thinking through a particular relationship between the road and the roadside, and I use it in several different ways. I read the black spot as a metaphor, as a repeating feature of road infrastructure, and as an actual place or site of social and economic life. For planners and road safety authorities, the designation of certain areas as “black spots” allows the naming of specific sites of breakdown and thereby the containment of a seeping sense of overall failure (not entirely successfully, as the language of “epidemic” around road accidents suggests). In this project however, “black spots” link localized processes to wider analytic gestures. These include an engagement with risk and its representations and an attention to the uneven forms that late capitalist development has taken in Kenyan rural areas. Here, then, I use “black spot”: 1) as it is used in road safety parlance (to describe a site of concentrated road risk); 2) to think about the interaction of dominant and marginalized regimes of accumulation and belonging; and 3) to explore themes of transgression, illegality, reputation, and negative value in ways that are linked to, but extend beyond, the accident-prone sites themselves.

In studying black spots as spaces in which marginal and dominant economic formations rub up against one another, I also engage a tension with respect to ideas of infrastructure: on the one hand, roads are considered to be “open,” state-secured pathways conveying goods, people,

and “progressive” subjectivities, on the other, they are associated with disruption, destruction, banditry, and transgression. In Kenya, as elsewhere, roads were built early in the colonial period, preceding other networked infrastructure. Tracking the paths of the caravan route, they have since served as path-breakers for services like electricity, water, oil pipelines and telecommunications. Consequently, non-networked infrastructural forms that would require these amenities have also tended to gather at their edges: shops, churches, schools, and hospitals. Extending into the Kenyan interior, then, roads drew toward them the conditions for producing the “new” Kenyan subject: educated, Christian, a consumer of manufactures, “enlightened.” Yet they also produced black spots—sites of infrastructural failure, of illicit and illegal activity, places with a bad reputation. Today, even as they channel and represent the circuits of formal commodity flows, roads and roadsides provide opportunities for marginal and “niche” economies to flourish. I thus draw on the concept of “black spot” to describe a complexity that can’t quite be conveyed by dualistic conceptions of rural and urban, dominant and marginal, agrarian and industrial. Furthermore, I argue that within “black spots” one finds concepts and practices being elaborated that rely on an explicit manipulation of these dichotomies.

Finally, road accidents play a particular role in making visible the localized effects of a shifting historical project: that of transforming the country into a modern, developed nation. Road accident rates have risen as a result of the country’s investment in new road and highway infrastructure, at the same time as investment in rural welfare programs, including health services, has declined following the implementation of austerity policies. In rural areas, with radically limited access to institutionalized emergency response systems and affordable health care, this means that accidents often have especially devastating impacts. Still, rural residents

remain invested in the road as a site of economic potential. Even in the face of frequent injury, the road continues to inspire what Rudolf Mrázek calls an “enthusiasm of the imagination” (Mrázek 2002). This chapter lays out some of the processes by which the road has been installed as a symbolic vehicle such that—despite its violence—rural residents and Kenyans more generally continue to affectively invest in it as a site of possibility. This symbolism, I will argue, is linked to the transformation of simple onward movement into *progress*. Nevertheless, it has not banished a lurking sense of roads’ potential violence.

The next section explores in more detail the relationship between roads and rural space. I draw on the history of colonial configurations of land, labor, and circulation to consider how roads produced both spatial hierarchies and new forms of accumulation and attachment.

II. INFRASTRUCTURES OF THE RURAL

This project draws on a classic theme: the social and economic transformation of rural life in the context of new forms of capitalism. But where anthropologists usually narrate changes in rural life as a story about land,⁴⁹ this is a story about roads. From the perspective of the road, a picture emerges that challenges received wisdom about the “rural” while also providing a corrective to the dominance of the urban in current social scientific work on infrastructure.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ For Kenya, anthropologists have described shifts in agrarian practice and temporalities (Geissler and Prince 2010; Cohen and Odhiambo 1989); changes in land use (Haugerud 1989; Shipton 1987); agrarian class formation (Kitching 1980; Nyong’o 1981; Cowen 1981); or “leaving the land”: urban migration (Agesa 2004; Giesbert 2007; White 1990). In Kenya, land is also the object of ethnic identity and conflict, making it one of the dominant themes of Kenyan historiography (Oucho 2002).

⁵⁰ In fact, roads more generally are an exception to the current urban focus of literature on infrastructure, in part because of the way that the long distance road has seized the imaginations of scholars and novelists alike (Beck et al 2017), and in part because road networks reach where other networked infrastructure does not (perhaps with the exception of mobile telephony, which is outstripping roads in terms of reach).

Roads and motor vehicles have long been in a dynamic relationship with rural space and representation of it, but this has rarely been explicitly theorized—attention to roads has not contributed to a theory of “the rural” in quite the way that research on infrastructures has reshaped ideas of “the urban.” In this section, I bring together analyses of infrastructure and development with histories of road building and rural change in Kenya to think through infrastructure’s role in producing rural space. I argue that the way that “the rural” has been conceptualized and reproduced in Kenya is linked to a long history of spatial development and mobility, within which infrastructure has played both a material and a figural role (Campbell 2012). I use this historical and theoretical analysis as building blocks for understanding how Shimalabandu and Gaakwen, as nodes embedded in wider infrastructural networks, challenge conventional thinking on both the “urban” (by showing that urbanization processes don’t only take place in cities) and the “rural” (by demonstrating the diversity and shifting nature of rural spaces).⁵¹

The infrastructure in the rural, and the rural in the infrastructure

Günter Wagner, a colonial-era social anthropologist, introduces his 1930s account of the North Kavirondo native reserve in western Kenya by noting not only the enormous difference between town and reserve,⁵² but also the diversity *within* the reserve (Wagner 1949). He suggests

⁵¹ The binary of rural and urban has long been destabilized in critical urban literature. Neil Brenner’s concept of “planetary urbanization,” for instance, describes how all parts of the world are drawn into the orbits of cities, and usefully describes the domination of the rural by the urban such that rural space is reoriented toward its new function as a reservoir / supplier of cities. This perspective is very useful in undoing the sense of the city as a unified spatial unit (think of how water reservoirs in upstate New York are owned by the City of New York and managed by NYC employees), but it doesn’t adequately consider how the rural and the urban *meaningfully* constitute each other, nor does it engage with practices and sensibilities understood as “rural” that remain from previous historical moments, and continue to shape possibilities for rural residents.

⁵² By town he means Kisumu, the largest town in western Kenya and the then administrative seat for the entire region. At the time Kakamega town was a very small district headquarters. Kisumu and Kakamega now name both municipalities and the largely rural counties of which they are seats.

this diversity would be best described by taking his reader on a virtual tour through the reserve in a motor car, so as “to give a general impression of this scene.” He starts off from Kisumu in Central Kavirondo toward Kakamega, the administrative headquarters of North Kavirondo. Driving on “a modern all-weather road,” Wagner describes the hills, views, and settlements from the vantage of the motorcar.⁵³ He wishes to linger on the receding view of South Kavirondo, but, he writes, the road “requires our full attention”:

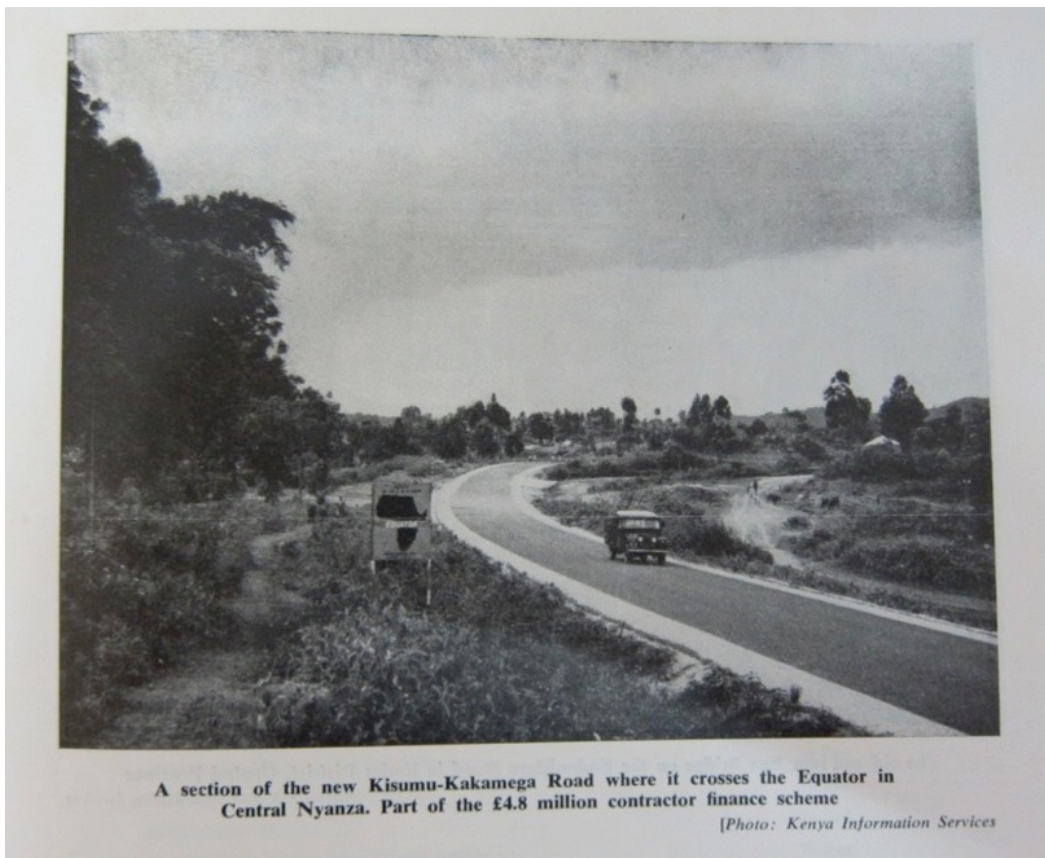
On narrow paths which frequently cross the winding highway we meet hundreds of Africans. They are mostly women and children carrying their produce—maize, sorghum, bananas, vegetables—to the Kisumu market or balancing on their heads the heavy boxes or suitcases which their husbands want to take along on their way to a labour contract in the ‘European Highlands’ or on the coast. They have become so accustomed to motor traffic they hardly step aside to let the car pass. But the numerous herds of goat and sheep grazing on either side of the road command even more attention than the natives. They have the awkward habit of darting across the road right in front of the car, while the herd-boy either runs away or looks on passively from a safe distance.

In this vision, the reserve is already dense with interwoven human, animal, and motor vehicle traffic; it is already a site of departure, whether for labor or travel to market; and it is already a site of potential accident.

Wagner is interested in “social change” and his description of the scene picks out the signs of modernity in the reserve. Markets, labor, technology are all present as Wagner rolls by. As he continues north through “fertile” Isukha and Kabras lands (passing by the present location of Shimalabandu), he passes shops where “enterprising Africans who have learnt from their Indian tutors are selling...commodities of European manufacture that have come to form part of the present-day native standard of living,” and where local “do-nothings” can be found “smoking and gossiping, and hoping to pick up the latest news of the world from the next native-driven bus

⁵³ Wagner’s research took place between 1928 and 1932, so his “tour” describes the features of a densely packed reserve of around 1200 square kilometers in the mid-colonial period.

or lorry that passes by.” He reaches the end of the road and heads west toward Bukusu territory. Now, he writes, “we are following a great African highway. It is the chief motor-road between Nairobi, the capital of Kenya, and Kampala, the capital of Uganda. Nevertheless, this section of it is only a poor road which after heavy rainfalls often becomes impassable.” On the way back from the northwestern reaches of the reserve, Wagner takes smaller roads rather than the highway. “The part of the reserve through which we are now passing does not yet show any marked change as compared with the old days...”



Archival image of the Kisumu-Kakamega Road, the one Günter Wagner was driving on, 1930s. © Kenya National Archives.

In Wagner’s account, the quality of the road is correlated with the level of development of the territory and its inhabitants: on the “modern” road, one sees signs of modernity in the form of

circulating labor, commodities, and news. On the smaller “native” roads, one finds fewer of these signs. Wagner offers this tour to comment on the penetration of signs of modernity even in the place set aside by the colonial government as a reservoir of tradition, and also, as noted above, to remark on the diversity of a rural space—and these variations as indexed in the quality and type of the road. Yet he makes no claims as to the role of the road in *producing* these changes. Rather, the road is a narrative vehicle for a certain kind of description: it speeds up his account, temporarily freeing him from the details of ethnographic description and allowing him to paint a “general impression.”⁵⁴ Nevertheless, in the rather unusual decision to use a tour in a motorcar to introduce an account of Luyia⁵⁵ customs, kinship, and magic, Wagner foreshadows a more contemporary interest in the relationship between infrastructure and social life, while also complicating an often-homogenous picture of rural space.

I use Wagner’s description in part for its reference to both of the highways this dissertation is concerned with (the “modern road” passing through what was once the North Kavirondo native reserve, and the “great African highway” stretching from the Kenyan coast to Uganda), but also because Wagner’s interest in modernization—and the link he makes between road quality and degree of modernization—is an enduring theme in scholarly, administrative, and popular accounts of rural Kenya. While contemporary studies of networked infrastructure are more frequently preoccupied with urban spaces, infrastructure’s capacity to influence both national integration and modernization efforts meant that colonial and postcolonial authorities lent a particularly attentive eye to the effects of infrastructure in *rural* areas, where social and

⁵⁴ Describing a passing environment in terms of the state of the road is a trope in discussions of “motoring” at Wagner’s time (see Ness 1934).

⁵⁵ Maragoli, Isukha, Kabras, Bukusu named in Wagner’s account are sections of the coalition now called Luyia or Aʕaluyia. They were also known as “Kavirondo” in the colonial period.

political stability were linked to the preservation of tradition. In the colonial period especially, officials both sought the integration of the reserves into the sociality and economy of the center and wished to preserve traditional norms. Thus even as they promoted networked infrastructure as a vehicle of civilizing modernity, officials were also concerned with its potential to destabilize reserve life.

Officials gauged the progress of districts under their administration through kilometers and quality of roads, as well as through censuses of the number of “modern” built structures. “Roads” is a prominent category in the template for reports by colonial administrators of their tours of rural areas. Provincial Annual Reports, too, included a section dedicated to road quality and length.⁵⁶ Furthermore, the ability to mobilize road-building labor was one of ways that chiefs (and consequently their colonial supervisors) were evaluated, meaning that roads were also an index of the effectiveness of indirect rule.⁵⁷ Roads feature so prominently in evaluations of colonial development in part because they were a condition of possibility for administration itself. But their importance also had to do with the fact that they required extensive mobilizations of land, capital, labor, and materials to build, and thus were highly visible transformations of both political and material environments. Roads not only enacted but also represented the colonial enterprise, in particular its claims to improving the conditions of the territories under their control through the introduction of modernity and order.

⁵⁶ Kenya was administered, for most of its 130 year history, in 6-8 provinces accountable to the central government. The Provincial Commissioner for North Kavirondo reported both to the Governor, and for matters of indigenous welfare, to the Chief Native Commissioner. The 2010 Constitution preserved the sub-divisions of these provinces, once known as districts, into counties with a degree of self-governing autonomy.

⁵⁷ Nyanza Province Inspection Book Vol. No. 2, 1912, PC/NZA/2/2. One comment about N. Kavirondo notes, “The more intelligent chiefs appear to vie with one another in road making, thus making the district without rival in this respect.” In an innovation of the indirect rule form, these chiefs and other authorities they governed with in the Local Native Councils, were appointees selected for their ‘progressivism, and responsible to their area administrators (District Commissioners) and the Chief Native Commissioner in Nairobi’. Most Kenyan communities did not have chieftaincies or hierarchies of customary authorities but were instead governed by large councils of elder males.

Contemporary interest in infrastructure in colonized and formerly colonized spaces has documented how infrastructure “makes” subjects in ways that are both material and ideational (Larkin 2008; Masquelier 2002; Mrazek 2002). But it is not only scholars who recognize this: the scholarly attention to infrastructure as a vehicle of subjectivation picks up on quite explicit statements by various authorities (colonial and postcolonial officials, as well as missionaries and development organizations) in which infrastructure is promoted as a means of “shaping” populations, from within and without. The various engineers of development sought not only to transform the living conditions of populations but, in doing so, to restructure their senses and transform their very desires. Kenda Mutongi describes how Quaker missionaries in Western Kenya, dismayed at the “disorder” of local spatial arrangements, encouraged converts to develop what they called a “straight eye” when building houses and planting crops. To develop a straight soul, one had to live within and desire straightness—smooth floors and bedcovers; square houses with straight partitions to avoid the tangle of bodies and animals that missionaries found so morally disturbing. Missionary villages were called *iliini* (line) because the houses were laid out in two lines on either side of the road and their corners were square. Mutongi writes wryly, “righteousness was apparently right angled” (2007: 46). The idea of a ‘straight eye’ suggests that form was more than the conversion of an external reality—converts were expected to internalize this new perspective, to actually alter *how* they saw.

But as Mutongi’s description makes evident, it is not the built form alone, nor even its intended use, but also the *labor* of creating form that is intended to enact the transformation of the self. Infrastructure’s subjectivizing effects were achieved not only in the interaction with morally charged material environments organized around straightness, hardness, etc., but also

through the organizational and physical labor required to build them. Road building labor was intended to serve this transformative and civilizational function by instilling discipline and, in some cases, by teaching “natives” the meaning of a wage (Coetzee 1988; Cooper 1996). The belief in the civilizational value of work helped to justify both the extraction of forced physical labor from “natives” in the early colonial period, and the requirement placed on chiefs to mobilize this labor.⁵⁸ But road building also made subjects through the *categorization* of labor, which was linked to hierarchies of space, of modernity, and of technology. Colonial road building efforts distinguished, for instance, between “native reserve roads” and “public roads.”⁵⁹ Reserve roads, which were not tarmacked, were built with so-called “communal labor,” which was unpaid, while public roads, some tarmacked, some not, were built with paid labor (though workers were paid far below market rates and their labor was also often coerced). “Communal labor” was widely used by colonial authorities to reduce the costs of infrastructure building. By framing this coercive practice as the traditional communalism of “Africans,” colonial authorities successfully appeased labor activists who agitated against it in the metropolitan press. Thus defined, the practice persisted even after the proscription of other forms of forced labor (Okia 2012). But it was resisted by its victims. A review of records from Native Tribunals in Western Kenya in the part of the 1900s reveals that almost half of the fines levied are for shirking road

⁵⁸ A report on modernization in Western Kenya states: “The more intelligent chiefs appear to [vie with] one another in road making, thus making the district without rival in this respect. ... A number of Chiefs and Headmen have now built three-roomed brick houses and have furnished them with European furniture. The majority of the houses have been built under missionary supervision. The brick and carpentry work has been done in most instances by trained Kavirondos. A very noticeable change has taken place in the habits and modes of living of the bulk of Mumias chiefs.”

⁵⁹ “The roads in native reserves ordinance,” KNA AG/41/80. The “Roads in Native Reserves Ordinance” of 1910 gave chiefs and headmen extensive powers to extract a certain number of days of labor per body per year. Superseded in 1912 by the Native Authorities Ordinance. In 1925, when “Local Native Councils” (LNC) were formed as part of the colonial move toward local administration, among the first decisions made by the North Kavirondo LNC was that the main road should no longer be maintained with free labor.

building duties.⁶⁰ The manipulation of “tradition” in the interest of colonial labor requirements also extended to the judicial realm. The Native Tribunals giving out fines to road duty shirkers were created to administer “traditional law.” Authority in these courts was backed by the colonial government but also by “invented traditions” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1984) like the administration of “native oaths” to the elders who adjudicated these cases.⁶¹ Thus, within the reserves, “tradition” was mobilized in order to create and enforce an exceptional labor regime intended to provide low-cost infrastructure and “development” to colonial authorities.

Through practices like these, reserves were spatially and institutionally set apart from the colonial “public.” This separation was inscribed in the very categories of infrastructural development, and has had longstanding social, political, economic, and subjective consequences. Road labor and its categorization thus both entrenched this dichotomy of “traditional/reserve” and “public” and encoded a sense of *distance* from the center. This distance is expressed not only in terms of road length (e.g. 150 km from Nairobi) but also in definitions of road type and quality. As the colony developed, the difference between central and marginal areas became not only more pronounced but also more explicitly defined as a distinction between rural and urban.

One of the things I examine in this dissertation is how infrastructure, entangled with both labor and spatial planning, produces a kind of space and a kind of subject that are understood as rural. What the rural means, through the lens of infrastructure, is often tied to a sense of exclusion or distance from the center. This idea has itself been produced by the role of circulation and connection in modernization theory. Edward Soja’s 1967 dissertation, *The Geography of*

⁶⁰ “Native Tribunals Cases – North Kavirondo,” PC/NZA/3/33/4, 1925.

⁶¹ PC Nyanza to Chief Secretary Nairobi, Jan 9 1944, PC/NZA/2/9/32: “Native Tribunals of this Province have been encouraged to use native oaths, and in the three Kavirondos all pagan elders were, few years ago, sworn to refrain from receiving bribes, and to administer impartial justice to all.”

Modernization in Kenya (written before he became either a Marxist or a postmodern geographer), offers a perhaps unexpected source for thinking through the question of the rural as it unfolded in Kenya. Soja's work is located within the tradition of modernization studies best exemplified by Daniel Lerner's *The Passing of Traditional Societies*. In this framework, circulation, individualism, and commercial exchange are the prerequisites for the modern institutions of democracy and nation-state formation. Thus, the interlinked networks known as "communications" in the colonial period (which included transport) both index and are the condition for modernization. Accordingly, Soja reads the diffusion of modernization in Kenya by examining lines of communication such as transport, postal, media, and telecommunications networks.

Soja's dissertation reveals the extent to which colonial government operates through the re-routing and management of circulation of people, goods, and ideas. But where he intends to show how infrastructure spreads modernization, his data end up showing him the inverse, namely that lines of infrastructure spatially reproduce social hierarchy and marginalization. Soja writes that infrastructure development, reflecting the "objectives and attitudes of the former colonial power and the resident European minority" produced a differentiated pattern of modernization, rather than the even development needed for national integration.

The main lines of communication, transportation and administration, focusing on the new urban centers and settled areas, provided the nexus for the transition from traditional to modern ways of life. At the same time, the spatial structure of social communications and the spatial relations between European and African areas guided this transition and helped produce the areal and societal differentiation in levels of modernization which exist today. (1967:51-2)

This text was later revised through the lens of underdevelopment theory to argue that the pattern in evidence is not one of differentiated modernization but rather of underdevelopment. Still, even in their original form his findings paint a picture of spatial hierarchy created through the construction of infrastructure (see Slaughter 2004 for a similar point). Soja captures this differentiation primarily through the concept of “core” and “distance.” He argues that Nairobi is the core from which modernization diffuses outward, and that the level of modernization of different districts can be evaluated according to how connected they are to this core. The type and quality of roads (tarmacked or not) and density of other communication media allow some places to be closer than others, in ways that don’t necessarily reflect geographical proximity. This argument foreshadows a later preoccupation with how infrastructure can “splinter” space, which I discuss below. Ultimately, Soja uses his data to argue that by reorganizing circulation, colonial authorities radically reoriented both social and political life toward the colony’s core and, at a regional level, toward development “nodes” created by the railway stops and branches, which themselves reflected the imperatives of settler agriculture (Ogonda 1992).

An interesting feature of Soja’s work is that his indices allow him to see what many others do not: namely, the diversity of different rural areas. While he continues to see urban spaces as the ideal-type of modernity,⁶² his attention to density of communications reveals that many areas organized around agricultural production nevertheless exhibit many features that he would call “urban”—he calls these “quasi-urban” spaces, and explains their urbanity through

⁶² There is some debate as to whether the city is in fact the ideal-type of modernity in postcolonial literature. Vjayanthi Rao writes that “whereas the experience of modernity in the West is explicitly associated with the city, in the post-colonial context liberal modernity, with its associated promises of freedom and equality, was explicitly associated with the nation” (Rao 2006). However, in the Kenyan context, the city and the nation were linked, because it was in the city that subjects were to lose their ethnic-rural identities and become national subjects (Slaughter 2004). It is significant that the association of city and modernity is not a hegemonic project across the African continent. In Tanzania, for instance, the village was the privileged site of socialist modernity.

their position as “near hinterlands” of the main centers of Nairobi and Kisumu. While Soja does not go so far as to question the usefulness of “rural” as a category, nor does he critique the parallel teleologies of rural-to-urban and traditional-to-modern, he nevertheless offers material with which to question a homogeneous conception of the rural.

I draw from Soja’s account the idea that infrastructures create lasting patterns of spatial organization. And I argue that these spatial patterns also come to be associated with more affective senses of distance and marginalization, as populations learn to “read” infrastructural connection (or lack of it) as a key to their own marginalization. As one of Kenya’s most prominent academics, Ali Mazrui, wrote in the 1980s:

One of the more obvious areas of Africa’s decay is the infrastructure. The road is fundamental to the nation and yet it is in large parts in utter disrepair, for mile after mile. It tells us a lot about the state of communications in Africa. It tells us a lot about the African condition [...]. The great powers have been to the moon and back, and now they are even trying to communicate with the stars. In Africa, however, we are still trying to reach the village. And the village is getting even more remote, receding with worsening communications even further into the distance. (1986:202)

As Mazrui suggests, if good connections bring things closer, bad connections don’t just leave them where they are but actually push them farther away—this is particularly visible in the way that rural areas seem farther and farther away from urban centers.

Infrastructure’s role in shaping such dichotomous visions of space is one of the reasons that roads remain such a potent symbol of inclusion in rural areas. In Kenya, the policy corollary to Soja’s analytic of “nodal development” was the adoption of François Perroux’s “growth poles theory,”⁶³ with its implications of an investment focus on high potential areas in the anticipation

⁶³ “Growth does not appear everywhere at the same time; it appears at points or poles of growth with varying intensity; it spreads along various channels and with differing overall effects on the whole economy” (Perroux 1955:309).

of trickle down. Infrastructure was a key feature of these distribution and development patterns, with lasting effects: infrastructures shape where resources can go and, in turn, determine what areas get defined as “off the grid.” In addition, because international trade routes are currently linked to transnational, A-class, roads, highways in particular become the “foreland” that defines rural areas as the “hinterland.” While Soja anticipated that the post-independence government would radically alter spatial development patterns, in fact many of the patterns he described persist: the central corridor of development, marked out first by the railroad and then by other infrastructures, remains Kenya’s central axis of development and circulation.

An aspect of modernization theory which has extended beyond the life of the theory itself is the association of connectedness with centrality and of stasis with marginality (for a similar point, see Tsing 2005; Grace 2016). What Soja’s visualizations reveal is that infrastructures of mobility are deeply interlinked with the creation of marginalization in the first place. Thus while scholars like Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin posit *neoliberalism* as the destructive force undermining the integrative and inclusive function of infrastructure, colonial history often speaks loudly to liberalism’s own contradictions, within which circulation simultaneously creates both integration and exclusion. As Armand Mattelart writes, circulation simultaneously proposes emancipation and constraint; transparency and opacity; “both the unleashing of movement and the consolidation of the center with the support of the periphery” (1996:3).⁶⁴ This helps us to understand why “development” (and requests for development) so often comes in the form of attachment to networked infrastructures, but also why the effects of such projects are so often contradictory.

⁶⁴ This literature helps us to understand why simply providing the conditions for physical mobility is often framed as a “pro-poor” strategy.

Development

The oversized role of roads in development ideology as well as in critical articulations of the failures of development deserves elaboration. While this dissertation is not primarily in conversation with the vast critical literature on development, it nevertheless engages what “development” has come to stand for in Kenya—what James Smith (2008) describes as a fuzzy set of ideas incorporating among other things, beliefs about economic growth and the availability of services. In particular, I engage the prevailing sense that tracking road quality and use is a way to gauge both the progress of and failures of development in the country. For this reason, I both draw on and seek to extend literature that describes the links between development and infrastructure. Anthropologists and historians interested in development were some of the first to attend to the importance of studying infrastructure in postcolonial spaces, both in the era of post-independence development planning, when infrastructure construction symbolized progress toward national integration and “advancement,” and later when the World Bank and other international development agencies pursuing “neoliberal governmentality” linked the circulation of people and goods to the emancipatory potential of markets. Scholars variously describe how infrastructure is symbolically mobilized to instantiate development’s ideology of progress (Harvey and Knox 2015; Hecht 2009; Larkin 2008b); how the development apparatus uses interventions like infrastructure construction to both neutralize certain kinds of politics and expand bureaucratic state power (Ferguson 1994; Scott 1999); how construction projects seek to recruit citizens into development ideology, while also constructing those citizens as the object of a certain kind of knowledge (Mains 2012; Smith 2008); and how infrastructural breakdown

affects both notions of belonging and the ideology of development itself (Larkin 2008; Mitchell 2002).

Roads play a huge role both in development projects and in critical literature on development. Ferguson notes this in *The Anti-Politics Machine*, writing, “it is astonishing how much importance ‘development’ accounts seem to place on roads. It is imagined, for instance, that ‘farm to market roads’ will make possible a transition from ‘subsistence farming’ to commercial production for export, and thus almost by themselves transform ‘traditional’ agriculture” (1994:57). Anthropological literature on roads and development, however, has been less focused on their effects than on the visions animating their construction—scholars have been particularly interested in the relationship between the “concrete reality” of roads and their symbolic role in developing world contexts (Campbell 2012; Dobrin 2014; Masquelier 2002). As Penny Harvey writes, roads “hold together the imaginative and the concrete in a quite explicit way” (2005:221). But roads also offer a vivid portrait of the growing *gap* between visions of transformation and the reality of everyday life. Jeremy Campbell calls this the “space between the material and the figural road, between the muddy track as manipulated by migrants and the would-be road of planners’ maps” (2012: 482). This “gap” has also been a focus for scholars of Kenya, where after a period of rapid road construction in the decade following independence, roads construction and maintenance entered into what Wilson Wasike calls “the phase of continuous decline” (2001:22). The disintegration of roads was materially manifested in the decay of road surfaces, in potholes, and in roads which, as a friend said to me, “become rivers when it rains.” As Mark Lamont writes in describing this period in Kenya, roads offered a kind of reverse enchantment, not the captivation of what Brian Larkin calls the “colonial sublime” but

a “reverse logic: as when the ethnographer finds in such infrastructural decay a kind of forensic wonder, asking how road surfaces came to be so rotten” (2017:172).

Attending to representations of this “gap” is important because it reveals that marginalization and distance are not constructed only through spatial patterns, but also by affective experience.⁶⁵ I have drawn important lessons from scholars who attend to the way that material environments become mediators of symbolic and moral meanings, in particular when they operate against or reveal the insufficiencies of plans (Fennell 2015; Larkin 2008b; Keane 1997; Mrazek 2002). However, in this project, I seek to shift the focus: first, I concentrate less on the meanings and ethical imaginaries generated around failure than on the constant effort to *suture* this gap, to overcome the contradiction posed by the failure of material environments to fully instantiate or realize visions of a progressive future. Second, I ask how we might theorize the harms of an infrastructure-development apparatus that functions *as planned*. The notion of suture comes from Vinay Gidwani’s discussion of Indian rural development planning, where he writes that development planning responds to “the desperate desire for a suture” that could close the wound of frustrated expectations (2008: xv). It is the act of planning itself that mediates between a present insufficiency, and a future to come. I have found Gidwani’s attention to both governments’ and rural populations’ attempts to resolve the contradictions of capitalism through the implementation of plans extremely useful for thinking about how roadside residents project smooth teleologies onto roads, even as these infrastructures frequently deliver disruption, injury and loss. What I explore here is how the work of suturing, undertaken by governments through

⁶⁵ This long life of these early constructions is striking in Kenya down to this day. Looking at a map, one is constantly struck by how differently spaces are deemed remote or near in everyday discourse, even as they are at the same line of latitude, or the same distance by road. This vestigial sense of distance survives new high quality roads.

the creation of infrastructure, creates new wounds which must again be sutured—this time by roadside populations themselves.

Gidwani's work resonates with development critics who have described development as an "anti-politics" (Ferguson 1994) or as "techno-politics" (Mitchell 2002)—an expansion of certain kinds of power and knowledge presented in the form of a neutral technological solution. While both present their work as an engagement with the "unintended consequences" of development projects, creating a perhaps overly schematic division between "plan" and "reality," they can alternatively be read through the lens of the "suture" to reveal how development projects respond to their own contradictions in ways that get recursively incorporated into the meaning of development itself. For instance, Mitchell's reading of the Aswan Dam project reveals how the fight against contingency and breakdown actually reproduces ideologies of expertise. He describes the Aswan Dam project, which sought to achieve control over the flowing water of the Nile, as a struggle to reorganize, integrate, and concentrate into the hands of a few a range of circulations—not just of water, or even capital, but also electrical, political, and chemical (2002:33). Mitchell argues that many of the durable outcomes of the dam project, like the creation of cost-benefit analysis, were in fact unplanned, on-the-ground responses to questions that cropped up during the process or after the fact. Part of the work of techno-politics, he writes, consists in covering up (suturing) these failures and making expertise appear as something that exists before and manipulates the real. Thus, he writes, failure is not merely the

“resistance” of nonhumans to human intention: the very division between “reason” and “nature” is created in the process of this struggle (2002:43).⁶⁶

In Kenya, successive governments have used the promise of new roads as means of repairing the cracks of infrastructure policy itself, and the tears in the national fabric wrought by inequality more generally. Immediately after independence (in fact starting before formal independence), road building was promoted as a strategy to correct the regional imbalances created by the colonial regime, and to lay the basis for the combined benefits of industrialization and a market economy (Wasike 2001, 24). This building mostly focused on upgrading trunk roads, but a number of rural roads programs were also launched, particularly throughout the 1970s when “rural development” was the focus of development plans (Ogonda 1992).⁶⁷ In the early 2000s, with international capital suddenly available, the National Alliance Rainbow Coalition government launched the most ambitious road building program to date. This was core part of a long-term development framework, Vision 2030, which has among its flagship projects major roads into Kenya’s marginalized north, including highways to the South Sudan and Ethiopia borders. The TNA-URP Coalition government made a campaign promise to tarmac ten thousand kilometers of roads and launched a new ambitious annuity financing scheme which

⁶⁶ A similar idea appears in Patrick Joyce’s reading of 19th Century urban infrastructures as both the model of and condition for liberal governmentality, reminding us of the close association of development and the liberal political reason that underpinned the promotion of urban circulation and “flow” in Europe. Joyce argues that liberal governmentality does merely work through the functioning of infrastructure, but also through its breakdown. The technology of infrastructure sought to make it durable and auto-regulating, but “drains broke, pipes leaked and roads had continually to be dug up in order to be fixed” (Joyce 2003). The more elaborate the systems, the more they broke down. Yet if this threatened to undermine the city as a space of free circulation, breakdown was precisely what linked infrastructure so closely to liberal political reason: “Both constantly creat[ed] problems for themselves in the very acts of their operation, so that liberal political reason, in order to govern, forever had to create problems and questions around which governance might be thought and prosecuted” (2003:71-72). Joyce suggests the idea of breakdown is essential to a certain version of liberal infrastructural politics.

⁶⁷ These included the Special Purpose Roads Programme, which was primarily focused on specific commodities (e.g. “sugar roads” and “tea roads”) and which was financed through the cash crop taxation; the Rural Access Roads Programme; and the Gravelling, Bridging and Culverting Program. Since the renewed focus on road building which accompanied the NARC and Grand Coalition governments, the World-Bank financed Roads 2000 program has been building rural roads.

failed to produce the desired results. During election campaigns for the 2017 elections, infographics circulated showing the Kenyatta government's dismal failure to achieve the promised kilometers and critiquing the soaring debt levels that accompanied Jubilee's flagship infrastructure project, the Standard Gauge Railway.,

Over the course of this road building history, however, the meanings of roads themselves have changed. From the era of grand re-imaginings of city and nation, and the post-independence era of investment in infrastructure as a framework for the nation, Kenya has become a late liberal, austerity state, in which infrastructure provision is represented as the facilitation of enterprise, rather than the inclusion of citizens or a promise of redistribution. As a solution to the problem of rural underdevelopment, road construction in rural areas now proposes to provide the conditions for accumulation in the countryside, rather than to include the rural into the project of the nation.

When I first traveled to Kenya in 2008, the era of decline and austerity was still palpably present in people's attitudes toward roads. It produced a suspicious attention to the "state of the road," which was reported on in newspapers, blogs, and everyday conversation. In the past decade however, the intense investment in roads infrastructure that started in the early 2000s has produced a significant shift in the public's attitudes toward roads. Almost anywhere one travels in the country, roads are being built, upgraded, or repaired, and their photographs shared with great pride. This investment both encourages and is encouraged by a rapid growth in the country's "auto fleet," which has doubled twice in the last decade. The effects of this investment are difficult to quantify, but it is a project of radical change. As Mark Lamont writes, this new "infrastructural dispensation" has accompanied Kenya's investment in the "neoliberal value of

speed” (Lamont 2013). The memory of decline lingers, but has been overlaid by an aspirational vision of the country’s rapid progress toward middle-income status by 2030.

But the new infrastructural dispensation has produced its own wounds, in the form of hardened inequality and rapidly rising rates of road accidents (which disproportionately affect people of lower socio-economic status). Roads tend to get more dangerous as they get faster and smoother, particularly in the absence of the slew of regulatory and safety measures that other countries have adopted to manage road danger. Successfully implemented, these mechanisms of risk management preserve road hazard’s status as an “externality”⁶⁸ but without them the risk becomes central to the functioning of the infrastructure. My focus on road accidents thus encounters the contradictions of road development in a modified form. It is not the *failure* of roads to work as promised that produces a “wound” but rather the particular form of their implementation. As Esbester writes of the automobile, “it is difficult to think of another technology that has, in the same short span, had such an impact on human life and death without having been intentionally designed to cause harm” (2015, 308). In rural areas, the effects of road accidents are particularly devastating due to weaker social safety nets, and the retreat of the state from rural development and health in the austerity-era. Increased road injuries have been accompanied by a reduced availability affordable and accessible health services even in public health facilities. One particularly severe outcome of reduced access and higher cost of health care is to dispossess rural residents of land: I observed during my research that selling or renting out land is a common strategy for poor families confronted with high hospital costs. More, if family members in employment could once be expected to chip in, many who went away to

⁶⁸ As Kim Fortun argues, thinking about toxicity and hazard as “side effects” or “externalities” of industrialization allows to focus on *managing* them while maintaining them as separate from industrialization itself (Fortun 2014).

urban areas and formal employment are out of work and can no longer afford to send remittances. When accidents result in long-term impairment, this means that poor families are dispossessed of *two* productive resources: not only their bodies, but also their land. These dispossessions have produced an uncertainty around the value of “speed,” which I discuss in the next chapter.

The Risks and Opportunities of Mobility

Roads are said to have spread both the risks and pleasures of modernity across East Africa, a fact that colonial officials viewed with both anxiety and satisfaction. Today, one hears of the HIV virus traveling along highways, spread by truck drivers. But long before the risk/pleasure dyad took this particular, viral, form, roads were vectors for various kinds of transmission. In western Kenya, migrant workers were said to bring back ideas, practices, new goods, and cash associated with their “modern” work spaces. Hannington Ochwada writes that rural residents, even as they despised the domestic labor that many migrant men did, “nevertheless admired [the] western outfit and grooming tendencies written on the immigrant laborers’ bodies” (Ochwada 2007). Moreover, this transmission did not always require the actual movement of workers: it was even more catching than that. Even road *construction* workers, who did not themselves travel but were simply in close contact with the road, were said to adopt some “westernized” practices. “Some Aβaluyia and Joluo, who remained in the rural areas but were drawn into colonial projects such as constructing and building roads, imitated European attire” (ibid.) He offers as an example a 1915 photo of a road worker in homemade spectacles and body paint that imitates shirt buttons. In the decades that were to follow, ideologies around

technology, mobility, and modernity came to be intertwined and entrenched in the symbolism of roads and motor vehicles, both as a medium for new forms of accumulation and new attachments, and as a medium of loss and detachment. This often took a gendered form.

In Günter Wagner's account of the road, it is a site heavily trafficked by women bearing the loads of their (soon-to-be) absent husbands and the burden of making a living in a rapidly changing world. Wagner's account dovetails with a wider depiction of social change in the colonial encounter as intimately linked to mobility. This gendered mobility is present even within the spaces set aside as zones of stability and "custom." Whether discussing men—traveling to settler farms, Nairobi, or the coast for wage labor—or runaway wives, colonial officials and reserve residents alike expressed anxiety about the dislocations that these movements occasioned (Kanogo 2005; Shadle 2006). Indeed, both were deeply invested in and deeply anxious about the new kinds of mobility offered by the colonial economy and its infrastructures for motorized mobility.

The colonial administration sought a balance between mobility and "stabilization" by constructing the reserves as sites of tradition and social reproduction. The balance was constructed as a gendered division: women were meant to be spatially fixed, a steadying force counterbalancing the necessary movement of men between reserve and labor spaces. Colonial administrators believed that if they kept people (or at least women) in the reserves, they could maintain social stability—understood, in this case, as the preservation of "custom" and forcing migrant labour to return home to family. In this framework, women's movement, and particularly their control over their own mobility, was troubling, as visible in the exaggerated attention of colonial and ethnic authorities alike to "runaway wives" and "prostitutes" (Shadle 2006; White

1990).⁶⁹ But the administration’s policy of balancing “controlled modernization” with “social stability” (a euphemistic description of the need to at once encourage labor migration while minimizing the perceived danger of bodies out of place) was a failed proposition even before it started. Officials sought to legislate the legal standing of women and their right to move outside the reserves, for instance, well after women’s right to mobility had been decisively claimed in practice (Kanogo 2005; MacArthur 2016). Indeed, Luise White writes that by the time of colonization, “a heritage of women’s mobility” had already been forged, in ways that prepared the ground for women’s later sense of their labor and reproductive power as both negotiable and transferrable (1990:33).

Colonial attachment to rural stability has been discussed by Claude Meillassoux (1981) and others in relation to the ways that reserve-based production supplemented the centers of the colonial economy. As Meillassoux argues—and, for Kenya, Michael Cowen (Cowen 1983)—the reproductive work done in the reserves allowed wages to remain low.⁷⁰ Women’s agricultural labor supplemented food needs for migrant workers, while the location of cultural reproduction in the reserves (under the sign of the “traditional”) also allowed both settlers (on whose farms workers labored) and colonial authorities to invest less in education, social services, and other forms of welfare (Cooper 1996). Even “progressive” debates around welfare reinforced the reserve’s role in protecting “Africans” against the harms of modernization. Fred Cooper quotes

⁶⁹ This elaborates the collusion based on shared interests between the colonial and ethnic patriarchies. Accounts from the period depict cooperation between ethnic associations and the colonial state to put unruly women in their rightful place, and included deportations from urban centers.

⁷⁰ In both cases, the specifics of this claim have been disputed. Nevertheless, the idea that rural areas were homes to which urban workers returned regularly has been well documented. Robert Bates commenting on post-independence economic policy observed that low food prices and controlled markets for rural smallholders subsidized urban industry by supplying cheap food and raw material for industry to urban areas. Better prices would force urban industry to pay urban workers better wages. As Colin Leys elaborates, women left behind in rural areas have for a long time been responsible for “the production and reproduction of the material conditions of existence.”

Merle Davis, a prominent Quaker missionary in Kenya, who believed that “[labor] migration disrupted the one strong asset Africans had—the ‘integrated solidarity and mutual dependence’ of African communities” (1996:52).

The dichotomy between native reserve and urban areas—in which the former reserves are cast as labor-sending areas of subsistence and (ethnic) reproduction, and urban areas as sites of cash economy and reduced ethnic commitment (Agesa 2004; Oucho 1996)—has had a long life. The persistence of the dichotomy is in part dictated by the fact that residents of the former reserve continue to out-migrate⁷¹ in large numbers, albeit increasingly to smaller towns and other rural areas rather than the major urban centers of Nakuru, Kisumu, Mombasa and Nairobi. In the historiography of labor migration, scholars have tended to pay more attention to urban migrants and the new lives they made in cities than to the effects of migration on rural areas, which itself reinforces the dichotomy of rural-stasis and urban-mobility, and casts those in the reserves as the “left-behind.” In examining views of mobility from the perspective of those who remain in rural areas, then, this dissertation contributes to an understudied theme. However, I also suggest that the perspective from the road reveals how much the dichotomies of rural and urban are themselves being challenged—not only by scholars of “planetary urbanism” who argue that the entire world is now subsumed into the resource-hungry ambit of urban agglomerations (Brenner 2013), but by rural roadside residents themselves.

Histories of workers whose work was itself mobile offer a means of looking beyond the dichotomy of domesticity and labor toward alternative social spaces and work opportunities found on the road itself. The literature on colonial and postcolonial transport workers argues that

⁷¹ John Oucho (1996) has called western Kenya a “human resource reservoir” for the country.

road work offered chances for accumulation that were more attractive than wage labor (Buerge 2011; Klaeger 2012; Grace 2013). Mobility in the form of transport represented far more than just the ability to move across space. It was also a particular form of accumulation, one more often than not linked to ideas of entrepreneurialism. This accumulation was, however, criticized along with other kinds of “entrepreneurialism”—either because it was viewed as a kind of exploitation (Hart 2013); because it generated short-lived wealth; or because it was not guided by an overarching “plan.”⁷²

The perspective from the road and its risks helps us to move away from concepts of rural life as a fundamentally “embedded” complex of land, kinship, productive activity, and morality. While these different features were and remain interlinked, they are linked in ways which have long incorporated a relationship to mobility, whether mobility means interacting with strangers *within* one’s home, traveling between different sites, or engaging in work outside conventional categories.⁷³ This long history also works against presentist assumptions that mobility, risky trades, and entrepreneurial accumulation are new phenomena in Kenya. Indeed, the current configurations of mobility and risk are layered over the historical dimensions of this experience. In the next section, I recount two stories that suggest the re-emergence of some of these layers.

III. ORIGIN STORIES

⁷² As one of post-independence Kenya’s seminal economic documents, “Sessional Paper n. 10 of 1965” states, “Surface transportation, outside of the railways, is privately owned and operated through many small enterprises. As such it is proving to be an excellent training ground for African entrepreneurs. Unfortunately, the services provided are varied in standard and quality and frequently are wholly unsatisfactory.”

⁷³ Within agrarian studies “mobility” often refers to how quickly a smaller producer will catch up to the productive ability of a larger producer.

The risks of mobility can impress themselves onto specific places. Both Shimalabandu and Gaakwen are defined by their reputations as risky sites—especially, but not only, as sites of road death. Each site has an “origin story,” a story that explains how it came to be named a “black spot.’ These stories speak to a “social memory” (Masquelier 2002) of the violent experience of colonialism, but also to a persistent question regarding the nature and sources of harm in modernity. While these stories present a range of approaches to causation and contingency, I do not present them as examples of “local belief.” I offer them as a means of depicting how histories of modernization leave experiential traces that re-emerge only in certain narrative registers. These are important to track because such responses to road development and mobility are often repressed by the enthusiastic embrace of the road as “development.” As one Shimalabandu resident said to me “The road brought light. Here is light and over there is bush.” He was the father of a son who had died in a grisly road accident and a resident of a village named after road death, both of which had been topics of our conversation that day. But here, he spoke the language of developmental modernity, a tone which I found dominated almost any conversation that was directly about the road. Thus I present these stories as an indication of the other registers in which one might speak of the road. Here, as throughout the dissertation, I offer stories as points of entry into questions that are not just about “beliefs” but about how worlds are constructed and ideas made effective (or banalized). I argue that we can grasp the concepts and logics of the sites we study through both the content and the narrative *forms* of stories (as well as in other sites like practices of measurement and saving, or styles of driving).

Shimalabandu is a collection of rural households located along the Kakamega-Webuye road. As you pass it on the road you see a few shops and some huge boulders—as soon as

you've seen them, you're already past. The road and its edges are the center of Shimalabandu, its main public space, and its internal dividing line: Shimalabandu includes both Isukha and Butso locations,⁷⁴ and the road is the line separating the two communities.

The road was first built in the 1930s as a murrum road, and was paved and expanded starting in the late 1960s. Both efforts involved labor conscription by local chiefs, though the later effort was financed and executed by Israeli contractors who paid their workers. When I was in Shimalabandu, the road was an asphalt highway narrowed by erosion at its margins, creating deep ditches on either side. It was trafficked by cars, public transport minivans (*matatus*), tractors pulling wide loads of sugar cane, and the bicycles and motorcycles (*boda bodas*) that are both ubiquitous and infamous in Western Kenya. Matatus with fourteen seats routinely carried over twenty passengers as they barrel down the road, veering into oncoming traffic. Twice on this road I was in a matatu that scraped against another, nearly colliding; and multiple times I passed very recent accidents on the road.

Shimalabandu is known across Kenya because it is a place where road accidents happen with a frequency strange enough to have given the place its name: *shimalabandu* in Isukha means “that place kills people.” When I asked why the village had that name, residents told me variations of a story. They said that sometime around the 1950s a motor vehicle swerved off the road and killed two people who were herding animals by the roadside or, in another version, killed two elders returning home from a drinking party. After that, motor accidents started happening there frequently and eventually the name Ichina, meaning “rocks,” changed. People would say, *shimalile bandu*—“that place has killed people”—until the name Shimalabandu

⁷⁴ Baisukha and Batsotso are sections of the Luhya ethnic coalition.

stuck. Some variations suggested that Shimalabandu was a dangerous place even *before* these accidents gave it its name, when the road was not a road but just a footpath through a dense guava grove. Thugs haunted the path. In other versions the thugs came later, in the 1980s, when the road was already notorious for accident. These later thugs do not foretell but rather amplify the current repetition of accidental violence. However far back the story goes to retrieve its origin, though, the narrations offer a “first” violence—or, more specifically, a first time when blood was spilt on the road. And the implication is that this historical bloodshed, whether by crime or accident, is what now causes cars to “fall” (*kuanguka*) at that place. Shimalabandu’s singularity lies in this strange repetition.

Gaakwen translates from Kipsigis as “place to be praised,” or “beautiful home,” a perhaps surprising name given that the truck stop is mostly known for its mud, illicit economies, and road accidents. Gaakwen sits at the bottom of a long hill, and many accidents occur when trucks lose control coming down the hill; or, conversely, when buses and cars trying to pass the trucks straining up the hill collide with oncoming traffic. A police checkpoint sits at one edge of the truck stop, but since the aim of this checkpoint is primarily to extract money from trucks, it does little to prevent the accidents that take place on the hill.

The year 2017 was particularly bad for Gaakwen. There were close to one hundred deaths on the stretch of road passing the truck stop. In light of these events, a theory re-emerged about the origin of Gaakwen’s troubles. It had to do with a double betrayal under colonial rule. At the end of the 19th century, the Nandi seer (“orkoiyot”) Koitalel arap Samoei, whose father was said to have prophesied the arrival of European colonization and the railroad (the famous “iron

snake” prophecy), blessed an armed resistance against the railway. In 1905, following repeated sabotage of the railway by locals resisting the capture of their cattle, he was invited to a peace meeting by the British soldier Col. Richard Henry Meinertzhagen. Meinertzhagen shot Koitalel in the head as the seer reached a hand out in greeting. The story—as proposed by Kalenjin elders and repeated across national media channels and social media—was that Meinertzhagen later wished to make amends for this betrayal, and offered to pay blood money to Koitalel’s family. However, the two chiefs who accepted the money did not bring it to the family. Instead, they bought a Chevrolet. They were cursed by community elders, and soon afterwards died in an accident at Sachangwan, the site of the 2008 tanker explosion. (A different version of the story had the guilty elders die in the 1950s, having made the fatal mistake of giving away the late prophet's regalia to a woman, the British Princess Margaret at a reception in Jinja, Uganda.) In both versions, the collision was with a white woman who escaped unscathed. The deaths left a mark on the place which transformed it into a site of repeated violence.

These stories are notable for the way they resurrect histories of violence in altered form, using them to make visible and to explain the strange repetition of automobile violence. Various, they trace links to the precolonial *and* to an instantiation of colonial-era violence which is already narrated in the form of a road accident. They present a juxtaposition between the mobility of the road now, and that of cattle grazing in the past. As other anthropologists have noted, such stories seem to condense an ambivalent experience of modernity (Johnson 2012; Masquelier 2002). Discussing stories of road spirits in Niger, Adeline Masquelier writes that what is significant about them is their ability to “articulate a wide set of culturally specific forces embodying the disjunctions, as well as the connections, the perils but also the potentials

characteristic of the experience of modernity on a rural African periphery” (2002:832). As I have sought to explain throughout this chapter, such ambivalence also characterizes interactions with roads and mobility in the rural Kenyan context.⁷⁵ Here, I am particularly interested in how ambivalence comes to characterize not just the road in general but *particular* places, making each into “a place where something happened” (Morris 2008). Both Gaakwen and Shimalabandu are marked by an eventfulness that sets them apart from other places.

As I completed my writing in December 2017, I read in the newspapers and on social media that the Deputy President’s wife Rachel Ruto had collected a group of preachers and with them sought to expel evil spirits from the road at Gaakwen. Rachel Ruto was not exactly a public official, although—as I pointed out in the preface—the spouses of public leaders often have a powerful role in public life. However, her intervention spoke to powerful and contradictory forces shaping epistemology in Kenya. In the months before Ruto “cleansed” the road in Gaakwen, public officials had thrown themselves at the plague of crashes. They had banned night travel, increased road blocks, stripped particular road transport cooperatives of their licenses to operate, and enhanced road patrols. The state articulated the effectiveness of these interventions through a discourse around road use that insisted on “human error” as a source of road accidents. (This discourse itself is influenced by the road safety campaigns of NGOs and international organizations.) Yet despite these efforts, another set of influences, in particular the complex of Christian and animist influences fused in pentecostalism, produced an alternative epistemology in which “evil spirits” caused accidents.

⁷⁵ Such stories were not the only logic available. Following the series of crashes, a group of Kipsigis elders—including church and public officials—met to discuss what was to be done. They determined that no evil spirits were haunting the road; in fact, they argued that Kipsigis don’t believe in bad spirits. Rather, they said, the accidents were caused by poor road design and bad driving habits. They planned to cleanse the road and pray for divine intervention as Christians, but also asked for speed-bumps to be placed on the road to help reduce crashes.

Ruto's decision was an interesting break with Kalenjin tradition (she identifies as Kalenjin). In the entire time I was in Kenya for my fieldwork, I had never met anyone from the Rift Valley who claimed Gaakwen's road hazard was shaped by malevolent spirits. Such ideas are much more prevalent further west, in Nyanza and Western Kenya (for instance, in Shimalabandu). Rather, curses were the language that expressed the ability of past generations to influence the present. Thus a larger meeting of Kalenjin elders responded to Ruto by saying that Kalenjins didn't believe in evil spirits, "only bad roads and bad drivers." At the same time, they argued that it was not her place to perform such rituals since they, as elders, were the ones invested with the authority to do so. Contradicting their own statement, they declared they would perform cleansing prayers at Gaakwen. To do nothing would be, perhaps, to lose their claim to authority over the forces affecting their community.

In the face of these varied and shifted responses to black spots, an account is needed of the effort entailed in "suturing" the contradiction of roads—in continuing to emotionally and financially invest in the possibilities that the road offers and the vision of a progressive future that is tied to infrastructure. Thus, throughout this dissertation I examine how social practices and local analytic concepts are revised and reformed in the process of assimilating and accommodating the opportunities and harms of capitalist development. I suggest that this reconciliation is a wider effort but one that becomes particularly visible around roads. This is in part because of the doubled ideological investment in roads as both the symbols of and the

condition for development, and in part because roads are an important site of opportunity.⁷⁶ Furthermore, I hope to show that the effort of suturing modern contradictions is particularly charged in rural spaces, which have a long and ambivalent history in relation to modernization. In local imaginations and in development projects, rural areas are represented as isolated from modernity—either so that they can be romanticized as spaces where values are preserved or restored, or so that development projects can more effectively claim to be shepherding a “transition from traditional isolation to integration with the national economy” (World Bank, cf. Ferguson 1994). Yet rural areas are far from isolated, and have long engaged with the contradictions of capitalist development. In the ethnographic chapters that follow, I aim to show how this experience of contradiction exists in relation to—and is transformed into—risk.

⁷⁶ Ferguson writes that “development” refers to two separate things—a process of transition or transformation toward a modern, capitalist, industrial economy, and an idea that is defined in terms of quality of life or standard of living. He argues that these two meanings are conflated, and this is particularly true in discussions around roads. Roads are justified as central to the first definition of development, and also serve as an indicator of progress toward the second.

PART I: ACCUMULATION

FATHERS AND BROTHERS

There used to be a fuel station in Gaakwen owned by a devoutly Christian man, a former Railroads employee, named Kariki. It was the first fuel station in the truck stop and was run by Kariki's son, Ruel. Frank, a university friend of Ruel's, told me a story about it. One day, he said, Kariki received an irate call from a man described as a horse transporter named "Offbeat."⁷⁷ Offbeat had been very pleased to have a fuel station in Gaakwen, which was conveniently located on the highway and in an area with few pumps, so he'd paid in advance for fuel. But, he told Kariki, he had repeatedly arrived to find the station dry. Kariki was surprised and distressed to hear this. He investigated and found that not only was the station struggling to buy fuel, it was actually in debt. His son Ruel had bought a sports car using the station as security for the loan—the car was then stolen.

Frank said that Ruel was a "fast boy." He was impatient, always in a hurry. He abandoned projects before seeing them through, and got ahead of himself in other ways. For instance, he dropped out of university. He got a girl pregnant before introducing her to his family. He had many business schemes. Most telling, he would leave the house saying he was going to come back with a given amount of money, say 35,000 KSH (\$350), but without saying how he was going to get it—and he would succeed. In short, Ruel was a "hustler." Before he was given the fuel station to manage, Ruel had actually been a small-scale land broker—connecting people

⁷⁷ This is the name of a luxury horseback safari company—I suspect the man referred to is Tristan Voorspuy, its South African founder. Voorspuy was shot to death in 2016 on his ranch in Sosian.

who were looking for plots with people who had plots to sell. His background as a middleman underscored his hustler pedigree.

As further evidence of Ruel's hustler nature, Frank explained that Ruel mixed money from multiple sources when he was doing business. This meant that, in addition to being "fast," Ruel wasn't "straightforward." He took short cuts. In contrast, his brother Kiarie was slow and deliberate. He managed his own part of the fuel business, a tanker carrying fuel from the Kenya Pipeline Company's Nakuru depot to fuel stations in Molo, Elburgon, Bahati and Njoro.⁷⁸ Fuel, Frank said, is a very *sensitive* business. The fact that Kiarie was able to manage the tanker even from a distance was evidence of his reliability.

Chains of association repeated: speed, short cuts, schemes, not being "straightforward." This set was opposed to another: slow, reliable, proper, *management*. Ruel's "fast boy" character, figuratively reinforced by the sports car, was all the explanation needed for his inability to hold onto money, or to manage it well. Hustlers make money in the short term, but aren't able to keep it. They can be impressive, inspiring admiration and even a certain awe, but in the long term their projects fail to create lasting progress.⁷⁹ The volatility of fuel metaphorically undergirds this story arc. Fuel represents the "new economies" in which hustlers see great possibilities, but may end up combusting.

Despite calling Ruel "fast," Frank thought Ruel's father was too hard on him. After the incident Kariki stopped speaking to his son completely. Frank, himself a devout evangelical and

⁷⁸ Towns in the Rift Valley, all founded by colonial settlers.

⁷⁹ Discussions of the hustler echo Michel de Certeau's discussions of the differences between tactics and strategies, where strategies are located in "the proper" while tactics refer to opportunities seized "on the wing": "The proper is the victory of space over time. On the contrary, because it does not have a place, a tactic depends on time—it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized "on the wing." Whatever it wins, it does not keep. It must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into 'opportunities.'" (1984: xix)

mortgage salesman, disapprovingly called Kariki “one of those Christians who thinks he can go to heaven by himself.” Which is to say, hustlers aren’t the “bad” to the strict Christian’s “good”—rather, they are “fast” to the proper “slow.” Ruel was volatile but he was not quite *bad*. His inability to follow through, his unfocused ambition, were signs of too much speed. He was not, Frank was eager to stress, a criminal. Nevertheless, Frank’s story was couched in a (Christian) framework in which Ruel *must* fail in order for the morality of the tale to make its mark, even as the father’s inability to forgive was its own form of failure. Thus the hustler’s moral transformation (from *bad* to *fast*) remained incomplete.

This story reflects a wider conversation about “hustling” in Kenya, itself an attempt to come to terms with the shifted aspirations, rhythms of accumulation, and general uncertainty that characterize the post-structural adjustment economy. Hustling is described in Kenyan media as “the art of using all means necessary to make money.”⁸⁰ One commentator writes that hustlers “work the system and make non-operational systems work.”⁸¹ Hustlers are “rarely assured of their daily bread,” and only make a surplus if they are lucky.⁸² Even the Deputy President proudly declares himself a “hustler,” who came from nothing. These presentations of hustling range from sympathy with the hustler’s uncertain existence to censure of their methods to a claim that hustling is the paradigm that will bring about a better future. As the Deputy President said in an election rally, “Who says hustlers are thieves? Hustlers are people who work hard. We have millions of Kenyans who hustle their way to prosperity.”⁸³

⁸⁰ Kwamchetsi Makokha, “Kenya is hurtling towards hustler heaven,” *Daily Nation*, Opinion Section, January 15, 2016.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² X.N. Iraki, “Hustlenomics: There’s lots more to hustling than making money,” *The Standard*, September 27, 2017.

⁸³ “Ati mahustler ni wezi?” Deputy President William Ruto,” youtube link, accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=puEs0XJthyE>

The concept-metaphors of “fast” and “slow,” “not straight” and “straight,” roughly map onto contrasting stances toward hustling in the post-structural adjustment period. One celebrates (or grudgingly admires) hustling, often glossed as “doing what you have to do to survive,” even as it expresses doubts as to whether it can produce long-term value. The other emphasizes the need to “be straightforward”—an ethical injunction to do things the right way, in accordance with both an idea of “tradition” and modernist-developmental values.⁸⁴ Frank’s story captures well this ambivalence surrounding the hustler and economic opportunity more generally.

But it also points to something else: to an ethical sensibility couched in the language of generation and space-time—both expressed in concept-metaphors that are (not accidentally) linked to motorized mobility. Frank’s was at once a father and son story and a story of brothers. It narrated at once an inter-generational rivalry (railroad/sports car) and an intra-generational one (fast/slow; sports car/tanker). In what follows, I carry forward both these themes: how generational change intersects with different temporal dynamics in the present; and how ethical subjectivities and attitudes toward value are embedded in concepts of space-time.

⁸⁴ The opposition of “tradition” and “modernity” is largely erased as these both become categories that orient a relationship to “hustling.”

CIRCULATION

Chapter Three

To the extent that the metropolis creates these psychological conditions—with every crossing of the street, with the tempo and multiplicity of economic, occupational, and social life—it creates in the sensory foundations of mental life, and in the degree of awareness necessitated by our organization as creatures dependent on differences, a deep contrast with the slower, more habitual, more smoothly flowing rhythm of the sensory-mental phase of a small town and rural existence.

—Goerg Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life”

I. CALCULATIONS

Two schemes for making quick money ruled entrepreneurial imaginations in Shimalabandu when I was there in 2014: riding motorcycles and renting sugar cane. The first entailed buying a motorcycle to use or rent out as a taxi; the second, renting a plot of already-planted sugar cane to harvest. When describing these plans, schemers would usually describe in detail their calculations of investment and return—they would recite the numbers, tracing out the sums on their palms or on a table, or even searching for pen and paper to write them down. It was as if the future existed in the form of an equation, and both this calculative form and the content of the schemes themselves seemed to me to express something about the changes in rural

life in this area. Though one involved agriculture and the other did not,⁸⁵ sugar cane rental and motorcycle taxi projects matched each other in their departure from traditional “rural” or “peasant” occupations and the scholarship around them—they suggested a kind of opportunistic mindset, both attentive to the possibilities of the now and open to risk; they were not attached to the land but rather to the possibility of quick profit. For these reasons, perhaps, they seemed especially attractive to young men seeking personal advancement. But, crucially, these were opportunities to be had *within* rural areas.

To me, these schemes represented a desire for something other than the more familiar alternatives for rural western Kenyans: farming and out migration. What these rural entrepreneurs were reaching for were opportunities that would allow them to get ahead in ways that smallholder farming could not offer. But unlike previous generations, in which men and some women migrated in large numbers to urban areas, they were searching for opportunity “at home,” in a rural area.

For smallholder farmers in western Kenya, traditional farming doesn’t offer much of a future in economic terms. Shimalabandu is located in Kakamega County, the largest of the counties in the part of western Kenya that used to be the North Kavirondo Native Reserve. Kakamega County has one of the highest rural population densities on the African continent (Theobald, Mussgnug, and Becker 2014). Degraded landscapes, soils depleted of their fertility, and ever-smaller plots do not give the yields they once did. As a result, both peasant subsistence

⁸⁵ In sugar cane rental farming, an individual will “rent” a small plot (usually between a quarter acre and an acre) of already-planted sugar cane. These opportunities usually become available because the owner of the sugar cane field has run into some difficulty during the (extremely long) period that sugar cane takes to mature, and needs quick cash. The renter pays a fee to the owner, which grants them the right to harvest the cane from that plot, sometimes even including the second harvest. The renter also takes charge of any weeding and fertilizing that needs to be done while the cane is still growing. This is widely understood to be much more advantageous for the renter than the owner, as the owner effectively loses not only the investment in planting but also control over the land until the harvest, which could be anywhere from one to two years.

agriculture and the once-profitable cash crop farming that farmers graduated into are closed off as paths to a decent rural life. And farmers know that they can expect diminishing returns from their plots; they have a Malthusian sense of the limits to the land's productivity. Smallholders must trade between growing cash crops and food crops, and often find themselves in desperate positions when cash crops fluctuate in price. The farms that are successful are those that can draw on outside income sources to invest in fertilizers and other inputs and to pay for labor when needed to intensify their farming—usually this outside source would be remittances from family members who have migrated for work (Crowley and Carter 2000). The sense that farming doesn't provide a future is nothing new, of course, nor is it limited to Kenya. It is visible in a longstanding theme in rural areas around the world: the idea that young people are looking for other paths. As the writer Ronald Blythe said of England almost fifty years ago, "The drift from agriculture intensifies" (1969: 79). It has become evident that the land—particularly the household farming model—can no longer sustain visions of the future.

The search for opportunity outside agriculture, what has poignantly been called "leaving the land," is most commonly discussed in scholarship on urban migration. In African studies this work has focused on the new lives that migrants created and continue to create in cities (Ferguson 1999; Simone 2004; White 1990) and on debates around the economic impact of remittances on rural areas (Oucho 1996). This orientation within scholarship casts rural areas as what is *left behind*—these areas have largely been described as the repositories of tradition and, in Kenya, of an ethnically homogenous form of solidarity. The rural is the "home" that urban residents remain attached to, perhaps plan to retire to, even as they are no longer "of" it (Cohen 1989; Geschiere and Gugler 1998).

But focusing on those who remain in the rural areas, or who return to them after a period of time in the city, reveals that rural areas feature many of the characteristics that have been associated with “urban” life—among these, a sense of uncertainty about the future in the context of rapid social and economic change, experimentation with a variety of forms of economic activity, an active engagement with contingency and risk, and a burgeoning attachment to speed. Agricultural lifestyles certainly retain some characteristics of classic “peasant economies,” like family and clan-based solidarity and socially-embedded economic activity. But rural residents feel acutely that their current position is unsustainable, and are actively involved in discussions about what a “new” life should look like. This chapter argues that discussions about new forms of *work* are a central site in which conversations about the hazards and possibilities of a new life are taking place, and its values being negotiated. Social life in Shimalabandu is deeply invested in paid work—not only that of absent migrants, but also that of family members who are present—complicating the traditional association of employment with the urban side of a rural-urban divide.⁸⁶

In the search for new occupations, it has become clear that some trades require more distance than others from the *boma*—the household compound and reproductive unit of rural life—whether this distance is physical or affective. The work opportunities I examine here represent an alternative in which young people can pursue opportunities outside farm life even as they continue to both rely on and to contribute to their *bomas*. One of the claims of this dissertation is

⁸⁶ It may seem obvious that non-agricultural income opportunities exist in rural areas, but the dominance of a rural/urban binary in much scholarship on Kenya has meant that their presence often been erased. Discussions of remittances, for instance, often assume that rural areas have no other access to cash economies—e.g. (Agesa 2004). Major exceptions to this trend are found in the agrarian studies literature, which has long noted that income generated from off-farm activities is a feature of Kenyan agrarian life (Berry 1993; Haugerud 1989; Kitching 1980); and development studies literature.

that road work offers a unique space in which to pursue this alternative—to leave without leaving. The road is a kind of internal outside: even when roads pass through the center of a community, and even when their margins provide space for community gatherings, gossip, and observation, they are also associated with publicity and with strangers. As Gabriel Klaeger writes in describing practices of “road watching” in Ghana, the road represents “the juncture of the local and the personal with the distant and often unreachable” (2013:456). Thus going to work on the road represents a kind of leaving even if the road worker continues to be a part of his or her rural household. And the “juncture” requires negotiation. Especially for those working in transport, a job which inevitably takes workers at least some distance from their homes and into situations in which they regularly interact with strangers, working on the road requires a new set of ideas around how to be “at home” and “away” at the same time. And these issues are all the more pressing because of the risks and dangers associated with roads and mobility—especially at high speeds.

This chapter focuses on a relatively new form of road work—motorcycle taxi, or *boda boda* riding. The successor to the bicycle taxis for which western Kenya was famous, motorcycle taxis became ubiquitous when, in 2007, the Kenyan government began supporting them as a response to the “crisis” of youth unemployment.⁸⁷ In offering tens of thousands of young men a new work opportunity, *boda boda* quickly generated a set of ideas about what kind of people motorcycle riders were—many of which centered around the dangers they posed to themselves and the well-mannered citizenry. This could be quite melodramatic: recently, a prominent

⁸⁷ The “boda” in *boda boda* is a modification of “border”—the first *boda bodas* were bicycle taxis that ferried and smuggled people and goods across the border between Kenya and Uganda. A friend who grew up near the border told me that the originally the term was “border porter,” but due to the lack of distinction between both b/p and d/t sounds in Western Kenyan languages, the difference between the two words was lost over time.

journalist proclaimed that “Boda bodas are flies flitting over the carcass of our rotting city.”⁸⁸

Here I examine how boda boda riders in Kakamega negotiated the risks and opportunities of this new work in relation to a wider set of ideas about rural transformation and austerity-era accumulation. At stake in discussions of boda boda, I argue, were ideas about the right way to *be* and about what to *become*—as a family or community member, as a citizen, as an economic agent.

Much of this negotiation took place as a conversation about risks and values, both of which were indexed to ideas about speed. Road workers in general, and boda boda riders even more so, were thought to live immoral and dangerous lifestyles, to be (too) “fast.” The idea of speed encapsulated ideas about morality, about risk, and about contemporary life more generally. These were often linked to a kind of money which was *also* “fast,” that is, money that slips away and doesn’t accumulate. Motorized mobility thus provided both the worksite and the form of space-time through which the values of new forms of work and wealth creation were discussed. However, these values were not settled, and were more often expressed as an ambivalence around speed than either an embrace or a decided rejection of it. Here I draw on economic anthropologists engaged with both capitalist and non-capitalist understandings of value and circulation to reveal the social and narrative effort that goes into transforming a new form of work into a source of lasting value.

Focusing on boda boda riders who have remained in or returned to their rural homes, I examine the relationship of boda boda with opportunity, risk, and morality as it appeared in

⁸⁸ Mutuma Mathiu, “Boda bodas are not cheap; the havoc they wreak is expensive.” *Daily Nation*, Friday, May 27, 2015. The article begins: “I hate boda bodas. They are filthy, noisy, hot, and dangerous. No human being should ever have to get on these contraptions. They are also ridden by people who have no idea how to use a public thoroughfare and are clearly not socialised for peaceful co-existence.”

western Kenya from 2012-2016. The chapter draws on long-term fieldwork in the village of Shimalabandu (where residents included both current and former boda boda riders), and a series of interviews conducted with boda boda riders in nearby Kakamega town.



Shimalabandu in 2014

Speed

“The street” has been, for urbanist literature, one of the most important concept-metaphors through which modern urban experience and values are articulated (Benjamin 2002; Simmel 1950; Quayson 2014). The street not only represents the urban, it is also said to generate urbanity: as Simmel writes, the metropolis creates its subjects “with every crossing of the street.” I propose that even in rural areas, the “the road” carries with it some of the qualities of the street that made it so central to the experience of urban modernity. In particular, an association with speed as both pleasure and anxiety, a sense of uncertain potential and publicity, a call to new kinds of alertness and individualism. However, where some theorizations have emphasized the street as a space of leisure, in this dissertation the road appears primarily as a site of work.

Simmel's work on the metropolis exemplifies the way ideologies are embedded into descriptions of mobility: he proposes that the unpredictable and violent stimuli of urban streets and economies "create a deep contrast with the slower, more habitual, more smoothly flowing rhythm of the sensory-mental phase of a small town and rural existence" (Simmel 1950: 12). In commenting simultaneously on the street and the economy as constitutive of urban life, Simmel's text reflects an association between the movement of traffic and the circulation of value that is visible both in classic texts of economic anthropology and in analyses of capitalist value formation. I will argue here that two forms of circulation—that of traffic, and that of money—work together to produce a particular space-time in rural western Kenya. More, this space-time is one that, as Nancy Munn argues for Gawa, is constitutive of meaningful order, and therefore of the construction of value (Munn 1986). For this reason, I describe this space-time not only as experience but as a "chronotope"—in Bakhtin's terms, a representation of space-time that gives clues into broader questions about the construction of meaning in a given narrative (Bakhtin 1981). The way the speed of life was analogized with that of a motor vehicle suggested to me the road provided a chronotope for Kenyan discourses about the contemporary.⁸⁹ However, discussions with boda boda riders revealed that the dichotomy of fast and slow was not projected

⁸⁹ In *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin describes the road as perhaps the most important example of the literary chronotope. For Bakhtin, the chronotope of a given literary style is the way it represents time and space. It is not merely a literary device, but a clue into how a text understands the world, the place of the individual within it, and the construction of meaning itself. Among the chronotopes Bakhtin discusses (the castle, the provincial town, the parlor), the road is recurrent. It appears throughout the history of the novel, taking different forms in different eras. In ancient and medieval literary forms, the road is a chronotope of encounter: it is a site that brings together people who otherwise would not meet, and its time-space is defined by chance and eventfulness—a plot moves forward by traveling along the road from chance encounter to chance encounter. In later eras, the road takes on a metaphorical role: rather than providing the site of encounter, it provides the metaphor for the path of life. Like the novel itself, the road shifts from a wandering narrative structure to a developmental one. Indeed, the road is perhaps Bakhtin's ur-chronotope, because like the chronotope itself, it both makes possible "the representability of events" and provides a structure of meaning for them.

onto a distinction between urban and rural, but rather was a part of negotiating everyday life “at home,” in a rural area.⁹⁰

I encountered western Kenya undergoing a long moment of transition, in which rural values around land, work, and social relations (especially within the *boma*) were being renegotiated. The radical decline in farming livelihoods *and* urban livings linked to austerity and the uncertainty of development was reshaping the form and meaning of accumulation. This exacerbated the sense that rhythms of money circulation and wealth acquisition that didn't always align with the rhythms of social reproduction; it also intersected with the expansion of visible inequalities. These changes were often expressed as an ambivalence around speed: the uncertain speed of money, which was contrasted with the slow earnings of “real” labor, and the speed of traffic, which brought new dangers into rural life. An ambivalence around speed was visible in multiple arenas but I focus on boda boda because they were paradigmatic of the “post-agrarian” transitions I trace in this dissertation. Different discourses of value converged around the boda boda rider, his mobility, and the money it earned. Boda boda riders insisted on the ability of their work to provide a future—if one could manage to control road money's almost ontological tendency to slip away—while a broader, community-wide, debate lamented the loss of a vision of the future embedded in slow, steady progress. Building on analyses of circulation which consider the mobility of cash itself as well as the role of capitalist circulation in shaping space-time (Bear 2014; Bolt 2014), I focus on riders' efforts to make money become valuable by slowing it down with the help of savings associations, agriculture, and their households. I show

⁹⁰ In a sense this undoes Simmel's argument, which relies on a sense of distance between town and country to claim that the city produces a calculative rationality, “intensified consciousness”—that is, a radically different subject. In showing how values and subjectivities associated with both town and country are being negotiated within a single space, I understand the production of values and selves as a dialectical process.

that boda boda work and the money it earned simultaneously mediated solidarity and futurity *and* suspicions of selfishness and the failures of development. Each of these ideas was constructed around the dialectical pair of slow and fast.

Experiences and representations of space-time construct a sense of being the world. This point is at the heart of Nancy Munn's discussion of the dialectics of value in Gawa, in which value is both expressed in terms of and constituted through the expansive potentiality of circulation. Engaging in this circulation requires the skill and knowledge to produce positive and dispel negative value. Here I consider the way that boda boda riders sought to produce value and dispel hazard through disciplined management of both their *vehicles* and their *earnings* in order to establish themselves as men and their work as productive. As Laura Bear writes, the "act of work" must orchestrate "temporal rhythms, representations, and technologies" in order to produce a successful outcome (2014, 73). For boda boda riders, this entailed managing the circulation of both vehicles and money; straddling the temporalities of their *bomas* and the road; learning to master a new machine; and engaging with the negative reputation of boda boda work. If successful, they could slow down their money without slowing down their mobility. This process revealed the way in which the circulation of narratives, money, and motor vehicles worked in concert to produce the space-time that could undergird value; as well as the contradictions that were threaded through this effort.

II. A BRIEF HISTORY OF BODA BODA

Western Kenya has long been associated with a marked attachment to two-wheeled vehicles, beginning with bicycles and extending to motorcycles. Taking root in the early 1990s in the former reserves (“*risaf*”), bicycle taxis were a way for young men to respond to what was, already then, emerging as a crisis in rural livelihoods. As austerity reforms were implemented, a policy demanding fee payment for public secondary and tertiary education put school out of reach for many young people. Old paths to cities like Nairobi, Kisumu, Eldoret and Nakuru for work no longer held the same promise, as the jobs available to low-skilled labor dried up. Alongside this, the structural adjustment programs instigated widespread disinvestment in agriculture by the state. Liberalization of cash crop sales led to a decrease in already meager profits from agriculture and the cash crops that once offered good returns could no longer finance rural life.

In this space, the frames of futurity handed down by the state, the church, and customary elderships were under intense pressure. When I arrived in Kakamega in 2012, communities were in flux—people regularly changed their religious denominations, customary practices (circumcizing boys much earlier than the previous generation), and agricultural techniques. I met residents so desperate that they cannibalized their own land to make bricks, leaving gaping holes that testified to the impossibility of agricultural livings. Many others were selling off their ancestral land piece by piece, even in the face of severe disapproval from kin. And although *risaf* residents still struggled to send their children to school, some expressed a sense that westerners were so behind the rest of the country’s overall achievement levels that they would never be competitive for jobs and are merely incurring unpayable debts by going to school. The overall sense was one of being “too late,” of having missed the boat to progress.

Even by the 1990s, rural conditions had already created what Isaac Otiende, the first Secretary of the Kakamega Bicycle Transporters' Association, called a "youth time bomb." In this environment, the idea that men could use bicycles to transport people and cargo took hold.⁹¹ Salaried workers with available cash began to buy bicycles to rent out for use in transport, and riders⁹² obliged in the dozens. The work offered a decent income, and riders supplemented agricultural work with this new trade or abandoned farming altogether.

For those who invested in it during its early years in Kakamega, boda boda bicycle riding underwrote small fortunes and even political careers. The early adopters of the business (some of whom rode their own bicycles, some of whom rented them out) created associations, the first of which was called Kakamega Bicycle Transport Association (KBT), with a largely Tsotso membership.⁹³ It was quickly followed by Bukhungu Bicycle Transport, with a predominantly Isukha membership. Ethnicity underwrote the early associations in part because space was ethnically defined, and as a result the bicycle routes were as well. Members of the associations were often neighbors, and they plied main routes that mimicked their own movement between town and their "home" areas. For instance, many of KBT's customers traveled to and from Lurambi, in Butso. Their stage, located on the side of town closer to Lurambi, reflected this orientation. The associations thus regulated both a particular route and its "stage," the place

⁹¹ Bicycles had been ferrying commodities and some passengers across the Kenya-Uganda border for decades already, but this work was marked by connotations of smuggling. Several physical modifications distinguished the new boda boda from their more rugged predecessors. The bikes were decorated, their carriers were reinforced to carry extra weight and padded with cushions, and foot rests were welded on for passengers.

⁹² A boda boda "rider" is the person who pedals or drives the vehicle. The person who is transported is called the "passenger" or sometimes "pillion passenger."

⁹³ Tsotso and Isukha are subgroups of the ethnic coalition now known as Âbaluyia, Luhya, or Luyia. The different groups in this coalition were grouped by colonial officials and ethnographers into an area referred to as "North Kavirondo," or sometimes "Bantu Kavirondo" to distinguish them from the Nilotic Luo who were located in Central Kavirondo (what was Nyanza Province). According to Priscilla Shilaro (Shilaro 2008) and Julie MacArthur (2016), Âbaluyia didn't begin thinking of themselves as a single ethnicity until as late as the 1940s, when they organized in opposition to gold mining interests which were taking over their land. Today, Luhya are perhaps the least unified of Kenya's ethnic groups, with languages that are not always mutually intelligible and fractured political affiliations.

where the riders gathered to wait for customers. Over time, the association came to be defined by the stage and vice versa.

The associations initially served as protection against theft and non-paying passengers and as a way to regulate the right to ply on the routes—they gave out numbers and a flag to identify the bicycle as one of theirs. In the beginning, the membership included only owners and owner-riders, while riders who were employed by the bicycles owners were not included. Later on, as the trade grew, the association decided to include employed riders, and took on other roles: protecting riders from predatory policemen, and protecting the images of bicycle workers in the wake of a spate of robberies blamed on boda boda riders. While bicycles today seem slow, sedate, even abject, in their early days they inspired a discourse similar to that now associated with motorcycles. Groups of young men on wheels, who could commit robberies and make a quick getaway on their bicycles, were an object of anxiety. The association's formalization was in part a response to assuage such fears.



The boda boda bicycle associations held bicycle races. The one depicted here took place in May, 1999. I am grateful to Robert Amachonye for letting me use these photos from his archives.

As the association grew more regulated, it registered with the Ministry of Cooperatives and Social Services. Robert Amachonye and Isaac Otiende, the first chairman and secretary general of the KBT told me—while showing me old printed photographs of early meetings, bicycle races, and electoral campaigns—that this formalization also led them into electoral politics. Pointing to a picture of himself surrounded by a group of young men and parked bicycles, Amachonye declared that he brought the idea of “campaigning” to Kakamega. He was the first, he said, to go around, make noise, raise a fuss around the idea of a campaign. More, politicians increasingly saw these organizations as pre-formed voting blocks and banked votes with favors and money. KBT even attracted the notice of Daniel arap Moi, Kenya’s second president. Moi came to visit them in Kakamega, and Amachonye attended meetings at State House in the 1990s when Moi was president. Indeed, Amachonye’s political career was ongoing—even while we were speaking, he was on the phone making plans to attend a political meeting in Nairobi as part of the current president’s party, TNA.

I initially met with Amachonye and Otiende because they were the first to ride boda boda motorcycles in Kakamega. They told me how it happened: in 2004, a man from Nakuru named Macharia came to Kakamega and held a meeting to sell the motorcycle concept to boda boda bicycle riders. Motorcycles had been common in Kenya, particularly for government use, since the 1970s, but they had not been used for passenger transport. Macharia was offering motorcycles on an installment plan. Amachonye and Otiende were the only two to take him up on his offer, paying a 35,000 shilling down payment each for motorbikes that, at the time, cost 120,000 shillings (about \$1,500). This down payment came from bicycle earnings, which each had invested in different ways: Amachonye in sugar cane, and Otiende in an ever-expanding fleet



Amachonye and Otiende with the first motorcycle in Kakamega, surrounded by bicycle riders from their association. I am grateful to Robert Amachonye for letting me use this photo from his archives.

of bicycles (he ultimately owned eleven, one which he rode himself and ten which he rented out for fifty shillings a day). After a period of thinking they'd been conned, they received their motorcycles and started using them in early 2005. At first, Kakamega residents rejected the idea that motorcycles were safe for passengers to ride, or even for owners to keep in the house. Stories of burning hot fuel and exploding motorcycles generated fear around mounting them. Much as they had with their bicycles, Amachonye and Otiende designed modifications to cover the hot exhaust pipes, provide a footrest for the passenger, and make the carrier stronger so that the motorcycle could carry a load. (They claim that the motorcycle manufacturers, especially the Indian company TVS, sent scouts to see what kinds of modifications they were doing and

implemented them as changes to the design of the motorbikes.) Finally the idea of the motorcycle boda boda took hold.

Many of the older motorcycle riders I met started out as bicycle riders, a progression made possible as the motors on their bikes extended their work lives. Bicycle taxi work, especially in hilly Kakamega, is physically exhausting labor that doesn't permit long careers. Bicycle riders expressed a clear sense of the limits to their ability to ride—a sense that the work consumed their physical resources in a way that couldn't be entirely renewed even by eating and living fairly well. “After ten years of bicycle work,” one said, “you can't ride anymore.”⁹⁴ Motor-based mobility radically reduced the physical demands placed on the rider, increased speed of travel and allowed riders a much longer tether from their homes. If working on the pedal bike boda bodas was as grueling as agriculture, the shift to motorbikes was a transition to a much less tiring labor (or perhaps, to labor that was tiring in a different way). Where the bicycles kept boda boda riders close home, so that they returned early for food and rest, motorcycles allowed them to travel further, and to be away longer. Importantly, the huge price discrepancy (the cost of a motorcycle is more than ten times that of a bicycle) significantly shaped who could own motorbikes and their viability as rental property.⁹⁵ These factors combined to widen the gap between boda boda and farm work: boda boda motorcycle work was seen as easy where farm

⁹⁴ This reflects a wider understanding that casual labor uses up people's bodies. When other resources are not available, workers consume their own bodies. Many jobs have an explicit time horizon – workers know they'll be able to do the job for a certain amount of time and then they won't physically be able to continue. The young men I worked with at an auto body shop in Nairobi knew that they were filling their lungs with fiberglass dust, and that a point would come when they would get sick; their eventual illness marked the temporal horizon of the job.

⁹⁵ There is a sense in which the motor created a rift between the rider and kin that was less evident with the bicycle—in its expense, its vulnerability to destruction, and its risk to the rider, the motor as an asset was difficult to reconcile with home relationships that were often already fraught. Most riders I knew were renting a bike from a neighbor, rather than from a relative. One rider who owned a second bike said that he stopped employing his young relatives because they took advantage of the relationship, were delinquent with payments, shared the bike without the owner's permission, and were generally careless with it—not doing maintenance, or overstraining the motor by carrying loads that were too heavy.

work was hard and fast where farm work was slow; it appeared to deracinate where farm work was embedding, and to require a more radical disinvestment from agricultural life and values.

Today there are over two thousand boda boda motorcycle riders operating in Kakamega town. In 2007, in what was both a repetition and a transformation of the use of boda boda bicycles to diffuse the “youth time bomb,” the Kenyan government removed the 16% tax on motorcycles with the explicit goal of making boda boda more accessible as a work opportunity for young men (Nyachieo 2012). This act, known as “zero-rating,” amplified what was already shaping up to be a sharp rise in the number of motorcycles being registered in the country. Bicycle taxis’ popularity had been limited to certain regions, but motorcycles proliferated in both urban and rural areas across Kenya and quite literally transformed both the country and the countryside. Like bicycles, they could go places where cars and buses could not, but much faster—they offered motorized transport where none had previously existed. Motorcycles’ proliferation and speed thus offered, more than bicycles, an escape from what Gina Porter calls “living in a walking world” (Porter 2002). They also provided low-cost connections to public transport routes for those who had no cars but wanted for reasons of privacy or affordability to live at a distance from a main road. Boda bodas began to be used as taxis, as small-scale cargo transporters, and as backup for politicians who needed noisy swarms of revving motors to accompany them on “road shows.”

In western Kenya, where bicycle taxis had already provided some of these services, motorbikes entered into and transformed both the political and social space that bicycles had occupied. When I met Amachonye he was still the chairman of KBT, which ran his “stand,” but the stand was dominated by motorcycles; both the bicycles and the associational forms that came

with them had largely been displaced. Indeed, the transition in their political function—from associations that offered voting blocks to motorized swarms that serve politicians as both votes and spectacle—spoke to the way that motorcycles were both a repetition and a transformation of bicycle boda bodas.⁹⁶

Kakamega town was dominated by boda bodas. At every intersection, outside every major building and shopping center, at the gate of every park and educational institution, a boda boda “stand” featured groups of young men sitting on or leaning against their motorcycles, or bicycles, waiting for passengers. Few stands had any dedicated physical infrastructure—like a canopy or a signpost—but they become known stands through the recurrent gathering of riders and through rules regulating who had permission to solicit passengers there. Amachonye’s stand was one the older ones, with a history that connected it to bicycles and the associations, but newer stands had a more cursory form of association. The stands each had a “chairman” who regulated the right to solicit passengers there, and most were associated with savings groups. They also served risk management functions—helping riders when they get into trouble with the police, especially, and levying collections for funerals and illnesses. But they were no longer engaged in larger projects as a group, nor did they convey the sense of associational identity that the bicycle associations offered.

In other ways motorcycles intensified rather than weakened the practices of bicycles. They amplified the separation from rural life that bicycles had begun by removing a labor force from agricultural work. And they brought with them an increased engagement with risk and

⁹⁶ Boda boda riders operate as a swarm not in the way Hardt/Negri describe—as a form of collective intelligence—but more in the way they the collective they form from a group of individuated machines inspires both fear and awe. Their noise and erratic yet coordinated movement threatens to overwhelm their audience.

danger—with both the discourse of risk and the experience of hazard and loss.⁹⁷ The hazard was associated with the fact that, as Amachonye put it, the motorcycle was a “machine.” By this, he meant that it went at a speed that was somehow not *human*—unlike bicycles whose pace was more directly tied to the effort of its human rider—but also that it was seductive in ways that wheels without motors were not. In this sense, the anxieties around boda boda linked them perhaps more closely with discourse around other forms of motorized transport (like *matatus*) than with bicycles, especially insofar as anxieties were expressed as a moral panic about, on the one hand, sexual misbehavior and, on the other, road accidents.⁹⁸ In addition to their quickly growing reputation for accidents, the association of boda boda riders with young men sparked all kinds of discussions around whether they were “safe.” Women were encouraged to ride sidesaddle to avoid straddling the motorcycle or touching the rider and motorcycles were rapidly associated with crime and general misbehavior like excessive drinking and drug use. The overwhelmingly negative media commentary attests to this reputation.⁹⁹

This panic was not without basis. Particularly in the first years following the introduction of motorcycles, the number of accidents took both riders and government officials by surprise (Nyachieo 2016). Several boda boda riders mentioned the number of friends and colleagues who died in the early years of motobike riding; in the Kakamega area, the Indian-made TVS

⁹⁷ While at the time of their introduction in colonized contexts, bicycles did carry with them a sense of risk (Hunt 1999), by the 1990s when they started to be used as boda bodas they no longer carried this aura of danger.

⁹⁸ Though bicycles were also associated with road accidents. It seems counterintuitive from today’s highly motorized perspective, which perceives bicycles as victims rather than perpetrators of road accidents, but before motorbikes, bicycles were considered somewhat dangerous road users. One of the things that the bicycle associations did was train their members in road safety using the children’s road safety parks that were constructed by President Moi.

⁹⁹ A selection of newspaper headlines about boda boda motorcycles from 2010-2018: “Who will stop this madness?” (2018); “Boda boda riders blamed for teen pregnancies in Taita” (2015); “Boda boda carnage” (2010); “Police pledge to rein in boda boda menace” (2010).

motorcycle was renamed *Tumalize Vijana Sasa* (“let’s kill young men now”). Amachonye and Otiende said there were so many funerals that finally they stopped going despite their leadership role, and so many accidents that finally they stopped making note of them. These concerns combined to generate a popular discourse claiming that boda boda was an occupation that offered no real future, whether because riders would inevitably die or because they would never settle down and invest their money in sociable ways (marriage, house, land). In an example of the kinds of lines that were drawn between the two occupations, Otiende claimed that bicycle riders were not particularly affected by AIDS, even at the height of the epidemic (which was particularly fierce in western Kenya) in the mid-1990s. He claimed that motorcycles riders were far more badly hit, in part because motorcycles had more money to spare.

Yet the somewhat hysterical discourse around boda boda riders (which is not specific to Kenya¹⁰⁰) was contradicted by riders’ sense that motorcycle work did offer a decent living. As many riders told me, the job was the first thing that allowed them the possibility of “advancing”—where advancement meant not only particular ideas around social and economic progress, but also access to an *imaginary* of ongoing progress and personal development. Before they began boda boda work, they said, it wasn’t only an opportunity that was missing, but the ability to even visualize a clear path forward. As I will argue in the remainder of this chapter, the “path forward” takes a particular form: it is expressed as both a calculation and a teleological progression of ever-larger motor vehicles; its values are discussed in terms of both time and directionality. This chronotope was informed by more widespread narratives about both money

¹⁰⁰ Michael Buerge’s description of the discourse around *okadamen* in Makeni, Sierra Leone, is remarkably similar to what I observed in Kenya.

and motorized mobility, and shaped the ability of riders to successfully achieve the “act of work.”

III. THE ROAD FROM RAGS TO RICHES

Circulations

The panic around boda boda is situated within two material transformations that produced potent narratives about colonial modernity: motorized mobility and the cash economy.

Anxieties about young men working in transport is a theme that goes back to the colonial era. Both colonial officials and local populations were deeply invested in and deeply anxious about new kinds of motorized mobility offered by the colonial economy and its infrastructures for movement and connection. This was especially so for those who made the road their worksite and became, in a sense, permanently mobile. Several recent histories of transport workers across postcolonial spaces suggest that road work was considered a morally ambivalent and hazardous opportunity, but one that people took because it also offered unique opportunities for self-employment and social mobility (Buerge 2011; Hart 2016; Grace 2013). As Jennifer Hart argues in writing about Ghana, self-employed “African” drivers not only “operated outside the conventional categories of the colonial economy” but were also able to “strategically transform social categories” (Hart 2014, 189).

These advances did not come without sacrifice: road workers learned that they must “suffer to gain.” Social breaks took place in part because of the risks and anxieties associated with mobility—a risk that jumped, so to speak, from the practices of mobility onto the drivers

themselves. The more generalized risks associated with road travel—accidents, encounters with strangers, disease—came to be seen as embodied in the drivers, such that containing these risks meant limiting interactions with drivers (Beck 2013).¹⁰¹ Thus in order to accept these new occupations and domesticize them, if not quite render them safe, communities had to negotiate ideas around temporality, kinship, and work.

Much as roads were symbols of national or regional development, motor vehicles became symbolic of individual development. The word for development, *maendeleo*, means, literally, “onward movements” from (ku)enda, to go and (ku)endelea, to keep going; it comprises a set of ideas around economic and social progress that are metaphorically linked to forward movement.¹⁰² The concept of development instantiates the metaphorical transformation of mobility into *progress*: simple onward movement is transformed into progressive, transformational, and fast movement. Roads have been the ur-symbol of this development at the national and community level. But increasingly, as James Smith writes, *maendeleo* has come to take on a more individualized meaning in Kenya. He writes: “The public came to use the term euphemistically to refer to selfish accumulation, as in the phrase ‘I have got a little development,’ *nimepata maendeleo*, meaning some wealth, a house, a car” (Smith 2008:33). In this more individualized understanding of development, the motor vehicle replaces the road as the central symbolic vehicle, making individual accumulation visible in the public space of the road.

¹⁰¹ Much of this work is written in the “appropriation” vein. Authors argue that colonized populations took technologies brought by a colonial regime and infused them with their own meanings and social practices; this re-encoding is then taken as a sign of African “agency” in the face of colonial oppression. While I believe this approach simplifies agency and resistance, in addition to overlooking the larger global dynamics that infused motorized mobility with certain meanings for *both* colonized and colonizing populations, these histories are very helpful in describing in a nuanced way how colonized populations engaged with what is called “modernity.”

¹⁰² “Development” has been much critiqued as a hierarchical concepts that places certain countries as “behind” on a scale of globalized progress. But as James Smith points out, it has come to represent a set of ideas within Kenyan discourse. I am using it in this sense—as a fuzzy term that describes a “feeling”—the sense of being equal to other countries—which is linked specifically to ideas about economic growth and the availability of certain services.

In contrast to the road, then, the motor vehicle represents the individual's mobility along the road to progress. And discrepancy in forms and speed of advancement become highly visible, even categorized, in the technological form that mobility takes. "Driver" and "pedestrian" do not merely describe a relationship to means of mobility, they in fact track class relations more closely than any division of "lower" and "upper." Thus unequal access to mobility (and to the motor as a means of production) is linked to another form of circulation—that of money.

Anthropologists have pointed out that anxieties regarding the unequal effects of capitalist and colonial economies were sometimes expressed as an ontological uncertainty about money itself. A focus on suspicion—around money that is too fast, or too easily earned—has appeared frequently in discussions of the articulation of pre-colonial and agrarian life with capitalism, particularly through the lens of money represented as devilish or "occult" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Sanders 2008; Smith 2008; Taussig 2010). These studies have tended to view the accusations of "occult" behavior as the indigenous expression of a critique of the "free market" or even of the money form itself (an earlier generation demonstrating how these reveal a critique of capitalism; later, a critique of neoliberalism). In Todd Sanders' analysis of the spirits that are said to help Tanzanian public transport owners become wealthy, he proposes instead that the suspicions around wealth he observed *mirrored* dominant ideologies, whether socialist or neoliberal, and were thus a means of "meditating on the relation between individuals and society, the origins of value, morality and the production of wealth in the world, past, present and future" (2008:122).

In western Kenya and across the country, suspicions around wealth earned too easily (expressed both in an occult idiom and not) are widespread. Wealth earned from transport has

offered a particularly available target for such suspicions: because of its association with potentially dangerous mobility; because it produced wealth outside material production; and because transport vehicles' presence in the public arena of the road makes them a site of conversation more generally. In what follows, I present two stories of suspicious wealth. Here, however, I focus less on what precisely is being critiqued than the *form* of the critique itself. It is in the form of the narration, I argue, that certain questions become visible. The narratives I present here offer neither a clear critique nor a clear acceptance of potentially illicit wealth. Rather, in their form they present an ambivalence—a split approach to the right way to make futures. In the context of changing economies, these stories ask, how does one convert the opportunities of the present into lasting value?

Two Tales

A pair of stories from Shimalabandu attest to the way that ideas around transport and around the speed of money worked in concert to produce ambivalence around accumulation that was “too fast.” Shimalabandu gossip often featured two men who had made their fortunes in transport work. Noah was from Emukaba, in Butstotso, a place separated from Shimalabandu by the road and by ethnic differentiation.¹⁰³ Toto was a wealthy man who worked in Kakamega town and had been born a few kilometers out of town along the Mumias road. The two men were not connected, but there was a similarity in the patterns of the stories told about them. Each had to do with wealth earned from transport; each story contained two versions—one straightforward, the other crooked (*kombo*); each involved an intimate betrayal. These stories

¹⁰³ The highway that runs past Shimalabandu also separates Bukhulunya and Butstotso. These are the “places,” respectively, of two different subgroups of the ethnic group known as Luhya—Wakhulunya, a “clan” of the Isukha, and Tsotso.

illustrate the anxious through-line running through historical and contemporary discussions of transport work: what kind of money is the money earned from the road? Is it social, can it accumulate, does it provide a surplus or a future? And what sacrifices does it demand?

Noah's story was one of Shimalabandu's stock of local tales (many of which ended up, at one point or another, on the road) and it was a story told in two versions—the split consciousness around road activity was contained in the form of the story itself. I first heard about Noah from his neighbor Mary. I was chatting with her and some others as she sold vegetables when she mentioned that Noah's *boma* had recently been attacked by “thugs” who killed his wife and two employees. He had been out and only came back after the attack, so he was spared. I was startled and asked Mary to tell me more about Noah. She obliged, telling me his story in the vein of “local man makes it big.” Now a prosperous wholesaler, Noah had started out as a *boda boda* bicycle rider. Gradually he had earned enough to buy a motorcycle, then several, until he reached his current position as a wholesaler and transporter with two lorries of his own.

While disturbed by the violence of the event, I was also surprised to hear that it was possible to earn enough from bicycle taxi work to advance materially—the more familiar story was that *boda boda* bicycle riders were rarely able to become wealthy, that they could not convert their work into accumulation. A few days later I mentioned Noah to Julius, an older Shimalabandu resident who had also been a bicycle taxi rider at one point. Julius knew Noah well, and told me that the story of gradual progress was a cover for Noah's real source of money.

Julius first described the straightforward story, in which Noah gradually advances through the steps of acquisitive development:

Noah was a boda boda *bicycle* rider—not motorcycle. Then he started a small kiosk, then he went on and built a shop, then he built his wholesale business. Then he bought a vehicle, a small pickup, a yellow one. Then after that he got a Canter, a truck, and now he has *trucks*.

Then he introduced the element of doubt:

So people said, “*ayii*, how is this possible? We’ve also tried this business, why does it pay so well for him, how does it return so much profit?”

And he explained:

There was a deal somewhere. The money was taken from somewhere... When he came back [from Nairobi] he bought a bicycle, but he actually had millions hidden in his house. You see, they took the money from a certain company.

Julius went on to explain, in a highly circumspect way, that Noah and co-conspirators had stolen money from a company they were working for and that the others had gone to jail for their crime. When they got out of jail they expected their share of the money. But Noah said “*hakuna*”—there is nothing. Julius implied that this *hakuna*, by which Noah denied his relatives their share, was why his farm had been attacked.

In Julius’s telling, the story of gradual progression was a careful cover-up to conceal Noah’s wealth from people who might try to steal or beg it away from him. The anti-social denial of relatives was extended to describe a wider selfishness. Julius explained this through a description of Noah’s slowness and patience—a sign of his craftiness:

People think, he has a boda boda, so he does boda boda. It must be that boda boda that brings him that shop. Since he started the kiosk, people have seen him moving forward *slowly, slowly, slowly*, he moves forward *slowly*.

Voicing Noah’s incremental advancement, Julius pointed out that Noah’s self-control in progressing “slowly, slowly, slowly” both demonstrated his discipline and almost fooled the

community into believing that he was *earning* his money. (Because money that comes from proper sources, visible work, comes slowly.) Julius also implied that people found it hard to believe that anyone who already had money would lower himself to do boda boda work, because boda boda is the lowest rung on the progression of vehicles toward “development.” Ultimately, though, Noah went too fast, and aroused suspicion.

The story always came to me in this split way. Even later, as I began to prompt conversations about Noah, I’d first get the “straightforward” version—Noah had started from nothing, progressed gradually, moved literally and figuratively along the road to success. Then, something like “but you know the truth...” would introduce the other version, the version that involved a short cut via betrayal. Apparently, Noah had been asked by two maternal uncles (*wajomba*) to keep some money for them. They were working for a company run by an Indian man and they had stolen money from the company. They knew someone would have to go to jail for the crime, so they asked Noah—the youngest and least likely to be suspected—to keep the money until they got out, in return for a share. But Noah was tricky. When his uncles got out of jail, he refused to give them anything, claiming he knew nothing about any deal (“*hakuna*”). These uncles, the story went, were the ones who attacked his home.

The split story illustrates a fundamental tension in perceptions of the road and transport work. Even as they are associated with progressive development, a certain uncertainty lurks within—the second version of the story introduces uncertainty in the meaning of the first, indeed, into the possibility of progress at all. The suspicion around Noah is reminiscent of what Jean and John Comaroff describe in their (1999) essay on “occult economies.” They argue that in the context of neoliberal capitalism, those who seem to have found the key to accessing wealth are

often rendered objects of accusation. What they call “millennial capitalism” is tied to the idea that value is delinked from production in the neoliberal moment, and they argue that accusations of nefarious activity emerge to compensate for this gap. Charges of illicit doings are levied against those who seem to have access to wealth despite the fact that they have not been seen to labor. In Julius’s telling, Noah knew that he had to *enact* labor, slowly and deliberately, in order to avoid suspicion and possible reprisal. But he aroused suspicion anyway, because his wealth was out of proportion with that of others in the same business, and because his progress, however slow, was still perceived as too fast. His slowness and discipline were then read retroactively as a sign of treachery and anti-social behavior.¹⁰⁴

Indeed, I had initially been surprised to hear of Noah’s success, because the standard narrative around boda boda bicycles was that—even in the early days, before motorcycles took the bulk of business away from them—bicycle taxi riders were not able to save money. Despite the evidence of success in Otiende and Amachonye’s stories, the discourse of bicycle-rider poverty remains powerful. Bicycle riders’ current abject position seems to have erased memories of a time when owning a bicycle was a source of status and work was plentiful. But this is also linked to a division between the past and the present that is predicated on the emergence of savings cooperatives for casual road workers. My host Veronica often talked about the bicycle riders who rented rooms in Shimalabandu in the time before motorcycles. She said when they made money, they’d bring meat home and “eat well,” but they never saved anything. In those days, before *chamas* (informal savings groups), she said, people didn’t know how to save.

¹⁰⁴ Julius explicitly described Noah as the kind of man who could build a high wall around his house, so high that no one could see his *boma*. This is the behavior of *wanunuzi* (sing: *mnunuzi*), people who buy land in Shimalabandu to build houses (and are therefore not related and have neither an originary nor an ethnic claim to the land) but have no interaction with the community. A community member acting like a *mnunuzi* is particularly treacherous.

Ventriloquizing a developmental discourse around saving, Veronica claimed that chamas rescued boda boda operators from a life with no progress. In her account, bicycle riders did make money and enjoyed a certain kind of success, but because they lived in a “time before saving,” this success didn’t lead to individual “development,” or *maendeleo*. They simply “ate” their profit.¹⁰⁵ This is why, she said, even people who were bicycle riders before motorcycles destroyed the trade have not “developed” today—they remain as poor as they were thirty years ago.

The tension in the two versions of the story is thus a tension around whether one can really earn productive (read: self-growing) money from road work: one suggests that road work *can* offer progressive development—stories of gradual progress through self-denial (*kujinyima*) are also moral tales offering a “straightforward” road to success. In this story the personal transformation brought by transport work is to be celebrated, as it also reveals the success of an ideology and a practice of “saving.”¹⁰⁶ The other suggests that the visible relationship of production and value is a false one: the money came not from work and saving, slow forward progress, but rather from a “short cut.” This resembles the contradictions that make one vulnerable to the evil eye in Julia Elyachar’s (2005) description of Egyptian workshops, where “transgression of the fluid bounds between short-term and and long-term cycles of interest, and between individual and community needs, was marked by the presence of the evil eye” (2005:23). Relational value, created through long-term interaction, was seen to be at odds with short-term individual profit. When the latter was emphasized at the expense of the former,

¹⁰⁵ “Eating” is a common metaphor for using money in consumption rather than investment. But research on boda boda bicycles provides a sobering literalization of the idea that riders “eat” their profit. In a conversation with transport researchers in Nairobi, they told me about a study suggesting that profit margins for bicycle riders are so small that they are essentially erased by the cost of the extra food that is needed to sustain them in a highly energy-intensive job. Unfortunately I have not been able to locate the study.

¹⁰⁶ I believe this differs from a standard (neo)liberal narrative around individual discipline because the saving is done collectively and relies on the formation of (non-kin) collectives/solidarities to be successful. However, the World Bank has displayed interest in savings groups as a first step to accumulation.

an attack of the evil eye could ensue. In Noah's case, the contrast is expressed as a narrative contradiction rather than as the appearance of the occult, but it nevertheless represented the "subversion of value," thus "destroy[ing] relationality as such" (Munn 1986:227).

Still, the contrast between version one and version two left the moral of the story unclear. The fact that Noah's wealth came from a more transgressive (crooked, *kombo*) route to getting ahead would seem to be unambiguously bad, and the story seems to offer a clear narrative of moral transgression and punishment. Except it wasn't so clear. First, the uncles themselves had stolen the money; second, maternal uncles are complicated characters, one's closest but also most demanding relatives after one's parents; third, in some understandings, Noah's wealth was a sign of success regardless of how he got it and what the results were. The second version of the story did not invalidate the first—rather, they existed together. Noah *was* successful and was respected as such, even as he *was* crooked.

To consider how respect for selfish acquisition and approbation of it sat side by side in rural western Kenya, consider the second rags-to-riches character, Toto. Toto was decidedly a "hustler," someone whose wealth came from "tactics" not "strategies" (de Certeau 2002), not from labor but from the seizing of opportunity. His way of speaking, sartorial and decorative references to urban youth style, and the fact that he was unusually wealthy for his age and background placed him squarely in the hustler tradition. I met Toto a few times, including once when I accompanied him, as part of his posse, to a youth soccer match he had sponsored. We drove in and were greeted like politicians entering a rally. Our arrival was publicly announced, we were rushed to seats at the front, given drinks. This was during elections season, so at the end of the match Toto presided over a scene in which small-scale political aspirants took turns

making speeches and being shamed into donating money to the soccer teams. It was a small stage, to be sure, but it made clear to me that Toto was in the political game. He wanted to make clear that he was a worthy and influential ally by positioning himself as a youth leader.

I'd first heard of Toto¹⁰⁷ as the owner of a public transport business known for the motto "Respect" written across the front of its buses. Respect buses ran on the route between Kakamega and Kisumu. The very first thing I heard about him was that his buses frequently got into accidents and he was suspected of being a "DW." That is, a devil worshipper, the implication being that he was using accidents as a blood sacrifice for demons who drink blood. (Blood-drinking demons are a Christian adaptation of the *majini* or "jinn" stories I describe in the introduction.¹⁰⁸ Being called a *majini* owner or a "DW" is a common charge against wealthy transport owners, particularly when a bus has gotten into a highly-publicized accident.) I later discovered that Toto's transport enterprise was far greater than the *matatus*. He also owned lorries and a luxury car rental business. In addition, he was the "chairman" of the Kakamega bus stage, and his SUV was often parked in the fuel station adjacent to the stage. He was thus not only a successful representative of the transport industry, he was its major player in this part of Western Kenya, and in many ways its leader.

Later my friend Petronilla told me more about Toto. She said he had grown up very poor, and that she knew him when he was still living in a one-room house. Then he got married but his wife died young, so people suspected him of keeping *majini* who brought him wealth, and of

¹⁰⁷ Toto's name itself is interesting. An abbreviation of *mtoto*, child, Toto is usually an affectionate name for a small child. Some kids hold on to it even when they're older, but it's unusual to see an adult with the name.

¹⁰⁸ As a reminder, *majini* are spirits (jinns) which are purchased from coastal communities (they are associated with Islam, the dominant religion on the Kenyan coast). They bring wealth (wealth in commodities, not in goods associated with social reproduction like cattle) to their owners and demand blood sacrifice in return. In Kiswahili, ownership of *majini* is expressed using the verb *kufuga*, to herd—*anafuga majini* means "he keeps/herds *majini*."

having sacrificed his wife to feed them. I myself heard this several times in Shimalabandu and Kakamega town, and Petronilla confirmed the stories were widespread. She said once Toto's brother had given her a ride in his taxi, and spent the entire ride defending his brother against such rumors. Petronilla didn't come down on one side or the other as to whether he was a majini owner, but she warned me to keep away from him. She also offered an alternative—but equally immoral—narrative for how Toto became wealthy. The narrative alleged that he made his fortune during the 2007-2008 post-election violence, when he took advantage of the confusion to steal vehicles. These vehicles became the source of his transport business and his subsequent wealth.

For Toto, as for Noah, transport work was not considered a sufficient explanation for his current wealth. The explanatory gap hinges on the way that motor vehicles function as symbols. Motor vehicles are, as noted above, the ur-symbol of personal advancement, but because of histories of ambivalence toward transport work, motor vehicles are not always considered to be a viable means of producing (re)generative wealth. That is, while *owning* transport is a clear *sign* of wealth, *working* in transport is doubted as the *basis* of wealth generation. To push this further, because owning transport generates status, and this status produces value, wealth appears to emanate more from status than from work.

When I returned to Kakamega about a year after I was first there and met Toto, I found out that he had won a government contract for road cleaning and had thus become a local employer. The road had once again rewarded him with wealth, a wealth that—like transport work—was ambiguously both the basis for and the symbol of status. There was no question that he had used political connections to get this position, in fact, that this was further evidence of some sort of political aspiration. Several Shimalabandu residents mentioned wanting to “work for

Toto;” one man I knew as a barber in Shimalabandu abandoned his barber shop to do so. In short, Toto’s name was growing.¹⁰⁹

Toto’s transformation from poor local boy into employer/political actor at the county level is an indication of the road’s political and economic potential as a source of wealth and status. But the rumors around both Toto and Noah suggest that such success is carefully monitored and judged for potential selfishness. What intrigues me here is the way that success and selfishness are evaluated according to metrics of speed and direction. As in Munn’s Gawan case, both time and direction are moral concepts in Kakamega stories. But as these double-voiced stories suggest, they are not unambiguous indicators of value. The conversions of economic value to social value, and the relationship of short-term and long-term interest, appear to be undergoing processes of revision. In these stories speed is ambivalent. It is indicator of a moral failing, it damages reputations, yet—through the circulation of Toto’s and Noah’s vehicles *and* their money—it also allows their reputations to circulate and their wealth to grow. Their control over space-time is increased, even as they also accrue negative values.

Returning now to motorcycle riders, I suggest that their work is framed within this double-voiced discursive formation around transport work and speed more generally, and within a chronotope of the road in which the future stretches forward as a succession of ever larger vehicles.

¹⁰⁹ Toto said to have been given the contract as compensation for his help in getting the governor elected, in context of Kenya’s transition to a devolved governance structure following the implementation of the 2010 constitution. The Shimalabandu resident who worked for him said that sometimes Toto would take the road maintenance crews off work and send them all to go support his soccer team, Homeboyz. The team was one of the ways in which Toto actively spread his name and expanded his reputation.

IV. FAST RIDERS

Boda boda work was associated both with the speed of travel and with the quick tempo of earning and spending—riders were said to earn “fast money” (*pesa ya haraka*). The speed of this money, contrasted with the slow pace of waiting for crops to mature or even waiting for a monthly wage, was used to describe both the attraction and the challenges of boda boda work. Fast money was appealing because one always had something in one’s pocket at the end of the day, and—importantly—because it was associated with the flexibility of working for oneself and free of the strictures of a boss or fixed timetable. But fast money could easily be “eaten” rather than saved, and was considered difficult to leverage into (re)productive assets. Both fast earnings and fast movement (with the potential for accident) thus factored into the ways that boda bodas were understood to be dangerously speedy, opposed to the slow earnings and slow(er) movement of rural life.

This section describes the way that boda boda riders in Kakamega adapted this new form of work to their home lives through a series of temporal conversions. Boda boda riders remained tied to their households and to agricultural pursuits, but being so required a degree of negotiation. I suggest that this negotiation took place, in part, by manipulating tempos: fast pursuits were turned into slower ones through the mediation of agriculture, savings associations, and families.

Tempo was an important idiom for describing the “risk” of boda boda, both the risk to themselves and to their communities. Being “fast” indicated not only boda boda riders’ vulnerability to accidental death, but also their perceived disinvestment from rural life. Popular

discourse around boda boda riders portrayed them as dangerous, dislocated young men who wasted their time and money on alcohol and women, and who did not invest in social reproduction or community futures. Boda boda riders contradicted these statements by emphasizing the ways in which they managed their risk, slowing themselves down. At the same time, though, they actively constructed an identity that drew on urban versions of street culture, replete with ideas about “swag,” “hustling,” and “surviving.” Thus, even while maintaining investments in agriculture and home, riders were engaged in a process of negotiating how to live in a new way, one that exposed them to various sorts of risks.

Two stories about the boda boda craze illustrate the way that anxieties around boda boda manifested in Kakamega. I often heard people disapprovingly tell a story in which a young man sold inherited land, or persuaded his father to sell land, in order to buy a motorcycle. In Shimalabandu, a neighbor who had done just this was widely criticized. The sale was spoken of as a mistake made by someone seduced by what seems to be easy profit, and who didn’t realize that it entailed the conversion of a reproductive resource into an insecure asset.¹¹⁰ In another story in this disapproval genre, a young man leaves his rural home and moves to the urban center to do boda boda work. There he lives a bachelor life and wastes his money on housing and frivolous pursuits. These stories present narratives in which motorbike riders abandon rural, agricultural, community-based values when they enter boda boda work.

¹¹⁰ More than a resource, land mediates and sustains family relationships. It is tied to family in part because family members are buried within the *boma*. Selling land thus means both selling the past (the graves of family members) and the future (what will you leave to your children). Anxieties about selling land are also linked to its shifting value. In Shimalabandu, like many parts of densely-populated Kakamega county, the meaning of land is changing. Its value as real estate, particularly near the road, has outpaced its value as agricultural land. Land ownership in Kakamega has long been more fluid than in other places—again because of population density—but new anxieties about landlessness are emerging in the context of the real estate boom.

While many of the riders I met did embrace the idea that they were hustlers—meaning not just they were businessmen living day to day, but also purposefully deploying the risk-oriented and countercultural heft of the hustler paradigm—they remained embedded in *boma* life and agriculture in multiple ways. Most continued to live on their family *boma* or within their family’s “home” area. And almost every rider I spoke to was engaged in some kind of agricultural activity: growing a cash crop, keeping cattle, growing food at home, or experimenting with another project like chicken raising. Even those riders who had moved to Kakamega for work often rented land where they could live with their families in the “rural” way—with space to have a kitchen garden, perhaps a few animals. Both those who were not married and those who were lived with extended families, even if not in the area they called “home,” and virtually all contributed money to the expenses of their extended family. This contradicted the stereotype of riders as landless bachelors who had abandoned a rural way of life for a new life of individualistic ease. Indeed, the actual economy and value system of boda boda work often directly contradicted discourse around it. And yet there was something about being associated with a powerful machine, and managing the incompatibility of this machine with the *boma*, which also drew riders into a different paradigm—where futures were imagined not on the land, but on the road.

The Condition of the Boda Boda Man

Boda boda work placed the bulk of risk on the rider, both the risk of physical accident and that of financial loss. Converting this risk into a source of pride was part of what made the particular, masculine, “style” of the “boda boda man”—a style that presented both awareness and

erasure of the contradictions of being a rural entrepreneur. Both the rider's vulnerability and his "manly" dispelling of risk were made particularly visible by the technology itself, which exposes the rider to the air. The rider, quite literally, absorbed the risks of the road in his body. As one rider told me, "the motorcycle doesn't have a body. You are the body of the motorcycle." This merging of man and machine produced a reputation for risky behavior. Associated with a fast and powerful machine, riders were themselves considered dangerous, rough and uncouth.

In late 2014 I rode on the back of a motorcycle as part of a large funeral procession. We were part of a group of twenty or so motorcycles escorting the corpse of a deceased Shimalabandu shop owner from the mortuary in Kakamega town to his home in Butso. The driver of the motorbike said he was nervous. He said he'd been in a funeral procession like this the week before. The riders were performing stunts, and one fell over, causing a mass accident among all the motorbikes pressed up against one another. No one was seriously injured but he was keeping his distance this time, he said. Such tricks—standing on the seat, doing wheelies, riding fast and tight circles—were one of the ways that motorcyclists proved their value as company for politicians and others who wanted to draw attention to their political spectacle. But beyond that, they were linked to ideas of what it was to be a "boda boda man." At motorcycle rider funerals, the deceased's friends would do these tricks around the grave: it was a way of laughing in the face of death.

Michael Bürge, in writing of *okadamen*, Sierra Leone's boda boda riders, describes their difficulties navigating the right way to *be*. Okadamen are castigated by normative discourse for their "alternative lifestyles," even as they see themselves to be doing what they perceive to be the right thing, a thing that builds their life. Bürge focuses on the question of riders' agency in

navigating their lives, “oscillating between the ability to invent their lives and the conditions one has not chosen, challenging the loss of control over their lives yet remaining enmeshed in contingencies” (2011:67). Boda boda riders, similarly, find themselves the objects, even the scapegoats, of a moralizing discourse that is actually responding to far broader changes in the social and economic conditions of rural life. One of Bürge’s central aims is to respond to the charge that okadamen are irresponsible, or more generally, that “Africans” are not properly calculative, by arguing that calculation might take forms other than longterm planning through savings. Bürge proposes that engaging in certain “risky” occupations, like drinking, made more sense than saving for okadamen. Investing in drinking relationships with friends who might be a source of support in a moment of crisis was more useful in their contexts than saving money in forms that might be stolen or begged away. Letting money go was the best way to keep it.

Bürge’s arguments are useful for thinking about the boda boda riders, who resemble okadamen in their embrace of contingency and investment in risk. However, those I spoke to were more ambivalent in their embrace of risk, sometimes speeding up, sometimes slowing down. Here I hope to demonstrate how boda boda riders sought to coordinate reputations, technologies, and temporal rhythms in order to make their work successful. Laura Bear notes that it is often through risk and accident—the moments when routines and rhythms break down or are interrupted—that one can see how this coordination is orchestrated: failed coordinations make visible “the many small acts of labour and their accompanying ethics that undermine or secure the fate of forms of accumulation” (2014: 73).

While the spectacular number of deaths and injuries from motorcycle accidents speaks to the difficulty of “orchestrating” their work, boda boda riders themselves were much less focused

on accidents than on the chronic stresses of the job. Riders prioritized the risk of losing money. They invested as little as possible in the elements prescribed by road safety institutions, including protective gear, training, and bike maintenance, while investing instead in bribes and evasion techniques. In their calculations, the probability and cost of arrests, court time, fines, and accidents were less expensive than was warranted by the outlay of licensing, insurance, maintenance, and observation of road regulations. My inquiries about whether it wasn't easier just to comply with regulations were met with incredulity, as the riders pointed out that, first, that they'd have to pay off the police whether or not they had infringed on traffic rules and, second, that the framing of road risk implicated boda boda as inevitably guilty, and thus they were unlikely to get payouts from insurers.¹¹¹ Thus their avoidance of safety investments was in fact the outcome of a risk calculation.

However, their lack of investment, and belief, in road regulations was not simply a disinterest in their personal safety. Rather, the risks that were regulated by road laws—especially road accidents—were not the most prominent of personal risks in riders' minds. More present were “stress” (especially around family and employer relationships), “*baridi*” (cold), and the police themselves. *Baridi* was the cold wind that entered the rider's chest when he was riding, and it was also the condition caused by exposure to this wind. Riders protected themselves against *baridi* by wearing extra jackets, sweaters, sometimes even cardboard against the chest.

¹¹¹ It sometimes seemed that the Kakamega traffic police existed for the primary purpose of extorting money from boda boda riders. The impossibility of innocence was often stressed by riders, and successful management of one's income involved practices of evasion and haggling to have bribes lowered and the rider and bike quickly released. Police cultivated a stance of disgust toward boda boda riders. During weeks spent observing in the police station in Kakamega town, I never saw an expression of empathy with a rider. Once a rider came in to collect a motorbike that had been impounded and kept at the station for four months, with a scar down the side of his face, just missing the eye, that testified to a serious crash. The police immediately took him to court to be charged and fined for driving without a license. When he came back they lectured and mocked him for being careless and uneducated. After he left, I said he was lucky to be alive. A policewoman responded: “we'll be picking him up again tomorrow.”

And helmets, for those who used them, were more often cited as protection against baridi than against crashes. Chronic illnesses were far more troubling to riders than crashes, which were perceived as avoidable, but also as more likely to lead to death. As a rider told me, “kufa ni siku moja” (dying only happens once). This perception was reinforced by the fact that riders who had been involved in accidents were often out of sight due to reduced mobility.¹¹²

Thus riders’ calculations more often revolved around management of relationships and securing the conditions for progress than around the avoidance of harmful events. They perceived the “speed” of their work as dangerous not so much because it could lead to accidents as because it could lead to a failure to realize progress. They needed to convert their “fast” occupations into slower ones. This was achieved both through slowing down their *money* and through managing the rhythms of a household.

Fast Money

About three quarters of the boda riders I met were riding a motorcycle owned by someone else, and all aspired to be like the other quarter, who owned the bike they rode. The “contract” between a rider and an owner is quite particular, somewhere in between employment and rental. Riders described this agreement as “being hired” (*kuandikwa*, literally “to be written”). This meant that they used a motorcycle owned by a *tajiri* (rich person), to whom they paid a daily fee.¹¹³ *Kuandikwa*, “being hired,” was not considered “employment” (*ajira*) by

¹¹² Motorbike accidents have a particularly high rate of death. Further, the kinds of injuries sustained are most frequently orthopaedic or spinal, a form that is likely to keep injured riders at home, and not highly visible.

¹¹³ The verb *kuandikwa* (to be written), meaning to get hired, was derived from formal contracts (it meant literally to have a contract drawn up in writing). In its current meaning, though, *kuandikwa* is a very casual, precarious engagement between rider and bike owner. In this context, then, the expression can both mean the act of being hired for formal employment, and the contract-less relationship of daily work. Perhaps when used to describe casual work in the boda boda sense, it means that in boda boda work the relationship never goes beyond the first moment of “being written”—never becomes the state of “kuwa na *ajira*,” to be employed.

motorcycle riders because their earnings were not fixed. They earned whatever was left over once they had paid the owner, and were thus the primary financial risk bearers in the business—they saw themselves as “entrepreneurs.”¹¹⁴ At the same time, this was more than a simple rental arrangement because getting a bike to ride usually occurred through a social connection of some kind. The bike was often presented as a sort of grant from a neighbor or (less frequently) an older relative, who then claimed to be giving the rider an opportunity.

Most riders didn’t think of themselves as working for anyone else. They called the work “*biashara*”—business. In its narrow meaning, *biashara* referred to trade rather than service jobs, but riders used the term because in its wider meaning, “to do *biashara*” meant to work for oneself, not to be “employed” by someone else (to be employed is *kuwa na ajira*). Though *boda boda* resembled other forms of self-employed transport work in its daily profit structures, it differed in this individuation. Unlike other transport work, though, where workers operated in pairs or crews, the motorcycle is a one-person unit. It was this sense that the motorcycle is a one-man operation, I suspect, that allowed riders to see themselves as businessmen, rather than employees, even when the motorbike belonged to someone else. The riders felt a connection with, maybe even a domination of, his bike that belied the owner’s claim on it. This connection was reinforced, for instance, by the fact that it was the rider, not the owner, who decorated and personalized the motorbike. (In the *matatu* industry, in contrast, the decorations were done by the owner.)

¹¹⁴ This is the term used by *boda boda* riders themselves. When President Obama came to Kenya for the Global Entrepreneurship Summit, *boda boda* riders insisted that they too were entrepreneurs and asked why they didn’t have representation at the conference.

The first thing that boda boda riders usually said when asked about their decision to begin working “on the road” was that they had no other opportunity. “Even if you went to school,” one rider told me, “you won’t find work;” another said, “I had no choice.” But a slightly different attitude prevailed when I asked riders if they would prefer a salaried job. Most of the riders I met told me they wouldn’t want “employment.” To have a boss, and especially to work fixed hours, seemed antithetical to their lives. This would prevent them from engaging in other pursuits (*shughuli*) and would mean that they could not easily do farm work when it was needed. In addition, riders said that they were used to “fast money,” and could not easily give it up for other kinds of income. Most riders I spoke with considered the job to pay relatively well, though those who’d been in it since the early days lamented how much fares had gone down since everyone and their brother started getting a motorcycle. Still, they were able to make between five hundred and 1500 shillings (\$5-\$15) per day after paying the owner his 350 or four hundred shilling (\$3.50-\$4) rental fee, which allowed them enough money to pay into their chama, or savings group, and still cover daily living costs.

The complexity of what “fast money” meant for these riders helps to elucidate their relationship with agricultural work and rural life. Fast money meant money earned daily. The “fast” in fast money referred, as I’ve said above, both to the immediacy of the money (not having to defer payment) and to its ability to slip through one’s fingers. It was also directly linked to the movement of the bike. As one rider said, “When you are still, your money stops.” The link between casual work and fast money also gave it its upsides: because fast money was earned from unwaged work, “fast” also meant “flexible”: boda boda workers were not bound to a

schedule and had the freedom to develop other projects—which were predominantly agricultural. Thus, they used fast money to underwrite longer, slower, investments.

Discussions of fast money revealed that not all units of money were equivalent. Fast money was also smaller money, was also slippery money, money that is difficult to hold onto (the slipperiness that is good for Gawan canoes is not always good for money). It was made in a day, and only meant to last a day. Larger units of money had a more durable quality; they were less likely to be “eaten.” They were slower to earn but—crucially—also slower to spend. Larger sums of money are seen as having the ability to reproduce themselves through investment. They are also big enough to be fixed into place—in the form of a building, or a plot of land, or a business.

Perhaps as much because of the *narratives* claiming that boda boda produced fleeting money as because of their actual earning patterns, practices and discourses of saving played an important part in boda boda life and conversation. As the rags-to-riches stories of Toto and Noah illustrated, one narrative around transport workers was that they did not know how to save; this was sometimes associated with the moral (in)capacity of the worker, and sometimes with the more metaphysical idea that “road money” (*shilingi ya barabara*, “the road shilling”) cannot reproduce. The question was, then, how does one turn fast money into slow money? Doing so entailed more than a mere addition of small increments, though it was *also* a practice of addition. Turning fast money into slow money required conversion (Guyer 2004). Money was moved through other people, or through mobile banking, to become something greater than the sum of its parts.

One of the more ubiquitous strategies for turning fast money into slow money was the chama. Every motorbike rider I talked to belonged to a chama (as do most women in Kenya of all classes, and most unwaged workers of any gender). Chamas work in different ways and according to different timeframes, but in the simplest version, each member contributes a fixed amount of money per day. These contributions are given as a lump sum to whomever is designated to receive the money that day, so that each member gets the whole pot after a number of days that corresponds to the number of members in the group.¹¹⁵ Chamas are usually made up of neighbors, or people involved in a similar kind of business: very rarely are close relatives involved in a group together. In this way, the chama is a supplement or alternative to kin-based solidarity (Kinyanjui 2014). It's a different kind of solidarity than that of kinship, however—people often commented that one can't levy a fine for late payment on a family member. Many boda boda riders were involved in more than one chama, but at minimum they were involved in the chama associated with their stage.

In its most basic form, the chama allows for smaller increments to become larger ones. But being involved in multiple chamas can allow members to have an even more precisely calibrated command over tempo. Several riders I knew from Shimalabandu were engaged in this kind of calibration.¹¹⁶ They distributed their money among these groups in different amounts and different time-scales. So Japheths (whose real surname, intriguingly, means “wealth that is hard

¹¹⁵ A second kind of chama invests part of the sum collected from members into a project, and a third kind lends money, with interest, for members to use as startup capital or to cover an urgent need.

¹¹⁶ Virginia said that there are two kinds of chamas, “*ya kuka*” (the sitting kind), and a new kind facilitated by the advent of cellphone payments, “*ya kutuma*” (the sending kind). In the “sitting” kind, usually a weekly or monthly meeting and usually involving women, the members are hosted by the person receiving the money that day. They drink tea, eat mandazi, and talk about any issues they are facing. The “sending” kind is more transactional. Members simply send, or drop off, the money. The dropping off version is a compromise that preserves a form of contact - all the members have to take the money to that week's recipient, or to the treasurer. The human interface is completely absent from the sending version, as the ease and convenience of mobile payments takes away from the possibilities of conversation and contact inherent in the original chama

to come by”) was involved in the daily chama linked to his stage, but he was also a member of a neighbors’ chama, which required payments of two hundred shillings, three times a week. Finally, he was involved in a boda boda chama where he contributed five hundred shillings once a week.¹¹⁷ This meant that around every month and around every quarter, he could expect payouts, and he organized his projects accordingly. As he put it, with two thousand shillings you can buy nails, with five thousand shillings you can buy *mabati* (iron sheeting for roofing or walls): bit by bit, he saw his road work taking the shape of a house. As in the succession of vehicles I will describe below, earnings were valuable insofar as they emerged in a material form—savers visualized their earnings according to where the money would ultimately go. The chama thus had a kind of proleptic temporal function (unlike a mortgage, say, in which one gets the house first and pays after).

In Morten Nielson’s description of a different kind of “road money,” money from road building labor, he argues that money undergoes a retroactive value transformation as it becomes a house (Nielsen 2013, 2012). Drawing on Nancy Munn and Roy Wagner, he describes value as the calibration of an intention and a spatio-temporal environment. Road work, which offered inconsistent and insufficient pay, produced “suspended value”—it became positive value only when it was (gradually) invested in the making of a house, and thereby became a positive “memory” (*lembrança*). Wagner calls the “tropic substitution”—by which road earnings retroactively became a “memory”—a process of “obviation”: a metaphorical substitution in which the new meaning replaces the conventional semiotic relation (Nielsen 2013: 82-83). In the

¹¹⁷ From the two hundred shilling chama, with ten members, he would get two thousand shillings approximately every three weeks. From the five hundred shilling chama, also ten members, he would get five thousand shillings every tenth week.

context of boda boda earnings and perhaps popular economies more generally, what riders refer to as “fast money” resembles Nielson’s “suspended value.” It becomes value as it becomes a “project,” or some kind of “development,” that is *maendeleo*, forward movement.

In the motorcycle business, then, the chamas are key mediators in this process of temporal conversion. Chamas draw their power from the idea that the collective can manage the tempo of money better than the individual. That is, the way in which small bits of money come together into larger bits is not through the summing up of money alone, but in the collection of persons: through this re-routing, money is slowed down. The collective is also a source of discipline, of course: some chamas back up their “solidarity” with collective force to demand payment, on time. One boda boda chama was described to me as so strict about the daily payment that if you didn’t pay members would go to your house and forcefully take something of yours until you reclaimed it with your payment plus a fine.

Chamas associated with a particular boda boda stage were the remnants of the associational life once represented by the bicycle associations. But it was an attenuated form of association, one limited largely to the collecting of money and emergency assistance. Indeed, savings routed through the chama were not perceived as solidarity. The boda riders I spoke with were insistent about the importance of saving as a form of *individual* calculative discipline. Japheths, for instance, told me his life story as a story of when he learned to save. His telling mimicked the narrative patterns of born-again transformation stories. He even used the diction of church narration—drawn out, full of significant pauses and rhetorical questions. The story starts with him as a bicycle boda boda rider, living day to day. A man he carried (anonymous in the story) asked him what his plans for the future were, and his only response was to say he had none

(“*siwezi jua mambo ya kesho*,” “I can’t know what tomorrow will bring.”). The man told him he’d better have a plan, or tomorrow would catch him while he was still on his bicycle. Japheths didn’t have even the fantasy of a motorbike at that time, but the man told him—“you can save” (this phrase, you can save, Japheths said in English). He told Japheths that the money he thought was so little (two hundred shillings per day) was in fact not scarce but plentiful. If you put aside fifty shillings a day, he told him, “you will forget that you don’t have money.” “When he told me that, I got it” (“*aliponiambia hivo, nikashika*”). Japheths saved and bought a second bicycle. Then he invested in maize, and started to sell maize on the side. He saved forty thousand shillings. Then he saw a man in town on a motorcycle and he thought—I can do that. He continued saving, continued saving (“*nikakaa nikakaa nikaendelea tu kuwekaweka*”). Finally he was within sight of the amount he needed. A relative (reluctantly) helped him clear the last hurdle and he bought his motorcycle. Now he has two and is considered quite prosperous in Shimalabandu, though he says the perception surprises him because he “has nothing” (“*sina*,” I don’t have—like Noah’s “*hakuna*,” there is none). Still, Japheths is putting his children through school and intends soon to buy land to farm—away from Shimalabandu, where he is surrounded by family who pressure him for various kinds of assistance.

Another boda boda rider, Karani, also described a transformation that would come through saving. He repeated his numbers as though he had been rehearsing them in his head for months. This is how he described his vision of the future:

So this is what I’m planning now. I have saved like fifty thousand, by December I will have sixty thousand, then I will buy a boda boda. And from then on I’ll be paying myself. I’ll be putting four hundred aside and I’ll still be paying to the chama what I pay now. The four hundred I’ll be putting on my phone and I’ll take it to the bank. After a few

months I'll buy another motorcycle and I'll give it to someone to ride for me. I'll keep putting that in the bank. Then I'll buy another motorcycle. When I've gotten like five motorcycles I'll sell them and buy a pickup.

Kevin's imagined progression along the hierarchy of motor vehicles, so reminiscent of the Noah story, described a kind of telos of road accumulation, one in which the future stretches ahead as a sequence of ever-larger motor vehicles. (The succession of vehicles that we see repeated here—from bicycle, to motorbike, to pickup and lorry—also neatly illustrates a hierarchy visible on Kakamega roads.) By insisting on this telos, these boda boda owners and riders tried to actively cast off the negative reputation of motorcycle riders and to turn the motorcycle—a risky asset—into a reliably (re)productive resource. Here, riders project their work into an established pattern of growth, one in which the motors get bigger and the speed of progress is ever-increasing.¹¹⁸

This vision of the future was also paired with another, in which the rider's accumulative future was coordinated with that of his household. In the next section, I discuss the way that married boda boda riders understood their work in relation to that of their wives.

Domesticity

The incompatibility of domestic space with the motorcycle was hinted at in those early fears that motorcycles would “explode” inside the house. The idea of explosion generalizes the risk of motorbikes, such that they metaphorically move from being risks that only concern the rider and passenger to risks that concern the community more broadly. Today, elements of this

¹¹⁸ One rider-owner transformed this narrative slightly by suggesting a proliferation of bikes rather than a telos of vehicles as the proper form of development. He thought it was important that the riders he employed eventually get their own motorbikes, so that the community benefitted. He said that when you are in a village and you have “personal development” this personal development should be the whole village's progress. It's not good to keep development to yourself, he said, and expressed his idea with yet another road metaphor: “It's as if the road is muddy, so you buy a plane, or a four wheel drive. Better that you take up the responsibility of constructing the road, so everyone can benefit.” This was a unique position, though, and perhaps spoke to his more comfortable status as an older, married man, and an owner.

expanding sense of hazard remain, though they are perceived through viral as much as through explosive metaphors. Though riders must keep their bikes inside the household compound overnight, for a “foreign” motorbike to enter a compound, especially in the dark of night, is a kind of breach. Neighbors will look to see what motor is infringing upon domestic space. The arrival carries air of illicitness—even of sexual transgression—or else signals an emergency of some kind. Particularly in compounds without electricity, which are lantern-lit and hushed at night, the roar of a motor and concentrated single beam of a headlamp seem radically disruptive.

An aura of illicit sexuality surrounded boda bodas, one which they tried to dispell. Boda boda riders were widely associated with casual sexual contact. Riders were sometimes accused of corrupting a whole generation of young women, in a renewal of an older discourse around motorized transport. (Though, in an interesting aside, Amachonye told me that the bicycle made for a better sex life than the motorcycle—the exercise enlived the rider, he said, whereas the motorcycle deadened him.) Riders inverted the hunter/prey binary that characterized talk about their sexuality by describing themselves as the victims of young women who wanted to trade sex for access to the riders’ money and for free transport. Thus both attracting and rejecting women was a means of “building” themselves (*kujijenga*).¹¹⁹ This particular version of manliness, was, not surprisingly, at odds with the progression through social forms that indicate social progress in rural western Kenya. The fact that the motorcycle made boda boda riders men to themselves but eternally “youth” to the outside world, even as they also sought to marry and become “men” in a

¹¹⁹ Brad Weiss describes a similar pattern by which men craft a social world in part through the expulsion of women in his essay “Street Dreams.” Weiss argues that young men in urban Tanzania come to “inhabit their own social displacement”—their difficulty in attaining the social forms of manhood or elderhood while unemployed—through an “assertive erasure of women from their social field.” By taking over in urban areas the spaces traditionally conceived as women’s spaces (the *kijiwe*, little stone, a site of gathering and gossip), they craft a masculinity that excludes women (Weiss 2004: 217-218). This is useful for thinking through why, in Kenya, the category of “youth” is a largely masculine one.

more social sense, was perhaps one of the most prominent contradictions of the boda boda rider's life.

Even as they were excluded from boda boda work, women were essential to the vision of advancement that many boda boda riders drew upon in constructing their narratives of progressive futures. In this developmental narrative, progress meant not only the gaining of financial capital, but also transformations of social status in the form of marriage and children. Several riders explained that boda boda work allowed them to marry and to feed and educate their children. Indeed, it was these family relationships which (retroactively, like the house-building) transformed their job into socially acceptable work. Riders I spoke with argued that boda boda could underwrite the establishment of a gendered division of labor through which their work could be transformed into “slow” work. Several riders spoke of having saved, or planning to save, money to give their wives start-up capital for a business, which the women could run from home (i.e. without leaving the village/children). Then, they said—and it was remarkable how the lineaments of this idea were repeated almost verbatim by different riders at different times—their wives would be able to take care of daily expenses while boda boda earnings could be saved for larger purchases and investments.

This gendered division of labor was seen as fundamental to creating the balance between long-term and short-term spending that was perceived by many as essential to household survival. In a reproduction of urban migration paradigms, it also established women as those who were “left behind” at home, managing the boma and children, and carrying the burden of the everyday. Meanwhile, it recast boda boda as the kind of occupation that befitted a “head of household”—one not concerned with the day-to-day of the boma but rather with bulkier

economic responsibilities and with future planning. In this way, the boda boda rider was shifted into the position of the wage earner (specifically, the *migrant* wage earner, who sends money at intervals), whereas the “wife” was involved in small-scale trade. The gendered division of labor reflected histories of rural-urban migration, in which women were often left to provide for daily expenses while men’s remittances followed a more episodic rhythm.¹²⁰ A vision of masculinity, different from the one that rested on the exclusion of women, was thus founded on a gendered division of labor that was also spatial and temporal.

I’ll conclude with the story of the boda boda rider I knew best, a neighbor from Shimalabandu. Jackson is an example of the way that boda boda work requires the calibration of employment relations, technology, and family, in ways that are subject to failure. Jackson’s family was from Shimalabandu but he had moved to nearby Lurambi because of conflicts with his mother’s second husband. This stepfather became ill and died while I was in Shimalabandu. Despite the conflicts, Jackson, as his mother’s eldest son, took responsibility for providing for the family’s transport, medical, and material needs as they nursed their dying relative. After the death he also paid the hospital and funeral expenses. He was expected to, in part, because as a boda boda rider he had access to both ready cash and transport. Because of the money and time costs of dealing with the illness and funeral, Jackson missed several days of payment for the rental of his motorbike. Its owner, a wealthier member of his church, took it away from him. Jackson was angry and deeply hurt. He felt that as someone in his community, someone who

¹²⁰ This itself is an idealized pattern, because many urban migrants are engaged in casual work in urban areas, rather than the waged work which shapes fantasies of the urban labor. Nevertheless, it supports a well established argument that rhythms of accumulation are structured by household practices (Zelizer 2012).

could see that he wasn't lying about the death and his own obligations, the man should have understood the situation. He also felt that after not missing a payment for over a year, he was entitled to some trust.



Jackson and his motorcycle transporting a maize harvest. He said that in order to carry such a large load safely, one had to be very familiar with one's machine.

But added to this sense of betrayal was a sense of loss. He was attached to the bike, which he had purchased himself with the owner's money. Indeed, we had had several conversations about how he decided which bike to buy, how he researched the costs and ultimately traveled to another town to buy it at a lower rate, how one learns how much weight the bike can carry, and how a deep knowledge of one's bike protects the rider from accidents that

those on an unfamiliar bike might get into. Despite all these conversations, it wasn't until the funeral that I learned he wasn't the owner of the bike. His pride in and history with it were so strong that I'd simply assumed it was his.

Jackson with a bike was a brash, charming young man. Without it, he was somehow shorn, his confidence deflated. Though he was convinced that his reputation as a safe and reliable rider would get him another bike quickly, he didn't find another permanent arrangement for half a year. It was as though with the loss of the bike, his luck also turned. Complications during childbirth put his wife in the hospital and led to additional hospital fees, and then the child was frequently sick and possibly bewitched. Jackson was forced to ask for money from relatives and friends.

In the two years following these events, Jackson gained access to another bike through a family member, and then again had it taken away. When I saw him with the new bike, his confidence was restored, his garrulous expansiveness returned. I met him in town, proudly carrying his one-year-old son on the front handlebars, confident that his skill would protect the child. After the loss of this second bike, he was deeply depressed. His wife repeatedly left with their child and he had to go and recover her from her parents' house, his shame adding to his depression and leading to the final breakup of the marriage. He discussed committing suicide. My sense that the fortunes of his entire life somehow revolved around the bike was deepened. The difficulties he faced seemed particularly stark to me, because I had thought him an example of the success a bike could bring. The narrative of transformation, the telos of the future that the boda boda seemed to offer, was interrupted.

V. CONCLUSION

I have suggested that the chronotope of the road in boda boda rider life scripts and rags-to-riches tales is double-voiced: it has a developmental face that proposes that the path forward is smooth, straight, and progressive—but it is also haunted by accidents and the possibility of its own untruth. Boda boda riders' vision of the future as a sequence of ever-larger, ever-faster motor vehicles, as sums of money continually being converted into larger units and ultimately larger vehicles, was haunted by the possibility that the temporal conversions and monetary transformations needed to bring this future into reality might not actually be possible. The road presented itself at once as the chronotope of a developmental telos, and as the undermining of that very telos. This uncertainty was made visible, I argue, by an ambivalence around speed as a value.

This ambivalence was not, however, expressed in a tension between the rural as “slow” and the urban as “fast.” Rather, it made visible the fact that neither the rural nor the urban was quite what we might think. First, a moral dichotomy around slow and fast was already present *within* rural areas, where communities distinguished between the temporal continuity and stability of land, and the speed and unfixed-ness of the road. But even this dichotomy was repeatedly undermined by temporal conversions that sought to modulate speed, by converting fast money into slower projects—both agricultural and not.

In Georg Simmel's description of urban life, the city is the site of the money economy, of anonymous transactions. Both the form and pace of metropolitan transactions give rise to—indeed, require—a “calculating mind.” Calculating means for Simmel both self-interested and

exact: the former being the result of the impersonal quality of urban transactions, the latter required by the complexity of the city's tempo. He writes, "the technique of metropolitan life is unimaginable without the most punctual integration of all activities and mutual relations into a stable and impersonal time schedule" (1950, 133). The strict dichotomy in Simmel's description, between the urban as the site of impersonal interaction, cash economies, contingency, and speed, and the rural as the site of slowness, habit, and "felt" connections, still underpins assumptions about rural life in East Africa. It is visible in popular discourse and to some extent in scholarship as well, despite the longstanding interaction of rural areas with cash economies and mobile technologies, the recognition of East Africans' maintenance of dual homes and identities, and recognition of the way that rural areas become integrated into urban means of production and lifestyles.

Simmel's description of the way that money economies, accelerated tempos, and calculative habits construct and reinforce one another is useful for understanding how value and its conversions function in the "third space" of the road. But seeing the resonances between Simmel's description of the metropolis and the lives of road-based workers in rural Kenya undoes the association between calculation and the money economy with anonymous urbanity. Boda boda riders adopted calculative habits and visions in relation to circulation, yes, but also in relation to their households and agricultural lives.

I have argued that boda boda riders' plans for the future take the form of proleptic calculations about their savings. These calculations are linked to ideas about individual development and transformation, as well as to the practicalities of achieving goals in the context of road dangers. Thus calculations are, much as Simmel writes, about calibrating and integrating

the complexity of their lives. But this context does not give rise to the temporal uniformity and standardization that Simmel describes. Instead, calculation is tied to temporal and monetary conversions. The form of money itself changes as it is aggregated: different units of money differ *qualitatively*, not just quantitatively.

If value is the calibration of an intention and a sense of space-time, as Nancy Munn and Morten Nielson suggest, if it has to do with the realization of a project, it is slowing, aggregation that makes monetary value emerge. Thus in order to align the two faces of the chronotope of the road—one the one hand, speed and vulnerability to accident or loss, on the other the path to transformation—“fast money” must be made into “slow money.” A crucial point here is that insofar as value is linked to both time and money (a familiar calculus), this value is realized when it gives rise to a form of transformation; when it aligns with the developmental chronotope of progress. In this way, value is created through a narrative form as well as a monetary one.

This chapter has considered how “post-agrarian” values and calculations emerge in relation to new forms of work and are embedded in everyday experience through the construction of chronotopes. In the next chapter I shift to a quite different space to describe the emergence of a roadside truck stop in the midst of formerly agricultural land. Whereas this chapter has focused on boda boda riders’ partial disembedding from agrarian life, the next focuses on what happens to the land itself such that it no longer carries agrarian meanings.

TRUCK STOP HOME

Chapter Four

Mokisasei sasan keruiyo kaita.

(We do not build a house with the heart but with the lungs.)

—Kipsigis saying

I. GAAKWEN

The first month or so that I lived in Gaakwen, I stayed just past the edge of the settlement itself—about a kilometer from the intersection that is the heart of the truck stop. My hosts William and Yasmin lived in what was called Chepseon, a cluster of small and medium-sized farms that predated the truck stop by a decade or so. The area had been settled in the 1980s by farmers from neighboring Kericho County, after the breakup of two colonial-era settler estates made land available. It took its name, “Chepseon,” from the part of Kericho that the farmers had come from.

This new Chepseon was near the highway, but had the quiet air of the distant rural. William and Yasmin lived on two acres of land close to the Molo River and the foot of Sachangwan hill. They owned two cows and a calf, and grew a small plot of maize. From their home, you could hear the rush of water in the river valley, and see the red dirt revealed as a line of new electricity pylons replacing old ones etched a path through dense vegetation, winding up the escarpment and toward the west. You couldn’t see the highway, though sometimes you could hear it—particularly when there was an accident. The compound, surrounded by trees and tall

cypress hedges, was invisible from the road. A world away from this bucolic setting, William and his wife Yasmin ran multiple businesses in Gaakwen's fast-paced, constantly shifting economy.

To get to the truck stop from this house, I walked along a straight dirt road road, past farm fences and their iron gates, until I reached the highway. There, I turned left and continued along it, on the remnants of an old road. An effort to reduce road accidents along this stretch had led to a realignment of the road in 2008, and this disintegrating asphalt was what was left of the former highway. I walked on past more fenced-in fallow plots, lush with shoulder-height grasses.

A five minute walk would get me to the mosque, a small stone building washed over in white and green. Now, the road and a tightly packed row of businesses sandwiched a broad slope of dirt where trucks parked. This was Gaakwen. Walking here, I would read the business names, often surprised to see one I hadn't noticed before. On the mosque side, the businesses spoke to Gaakwen's cosmopolitanism. AINU SHAMSI, named for a Cairo neighborhood, was run by a family from the nearby town of Nakuru. It served spiced teas and coastal sweets, and showed loud Indian cinema. Further on, a row of shops sold khat under titles such as Dubai Shop and MANDERA SHOP. MATOKE HOTEL sold Ugandan food. BISMILLAH HOTEL served Somali food; its owner came to Gaakwen from Wajir in Kenya's North Eastern Province.

The businesses running parallel on the other side of the highway offered similar services, but had names that spoke more directly to the business of the road. VISION 2030 was named for Kenya's infrastructure-driven economic blueprint. STAGE PARK HOTEL and STOP OVER SHOP spoke for themselves, as did STAREHE HOTEL ("starehe" means rest in Kiswahili). VITENDO GUEST, boasting a large mural showing a truck lugging a Maersk container, was the property of a truck driver who had invested his savings in Gaakwen.



Vitendo Guest House with trucking mural. The palm trees on the right represent the coast, where most loads originate.

Between the highway and the facades of the businesses was where trucks parked. Parking there was tricky because of the steep slope coming down from the highway. It was slippery when it rained, and the weight of the trucks dug deep ruts and enormous potholes that filled with water. Yet, at night this space was completely filled with hulking tractor-trailers. Gaakwen's businesses funded a night watch that patrolled the space, assuring truckers that their vehicles and cargo were safe. The tightly packed trucks created a strange landscape of shadowy corners in the dark—threading through them to cross the road, I would often stumble upon a couple flirting or transacting.

This nondescript strip of dirt was one of Gaakwen's most valuable resources. It was at the center of a dispute between Gaakwen and the state that over time would escalate into full-blown

protest. A rest stop here had grown into a bustling settlement, but its economy remained dependent on cash from truckers who spent the night in its bars, eateries and guest houses. While truckers had come to like Gaakwen for its nightlife and its reputation for security, the inadequate parking made some hesitant to stay there. It got worse in 2016 when the county government started, and then halted midway, a project to build a paved parking bay. The stalled construction made parking more treacherous, prompting some residents to say that they were being “sabotaged by development.” Around the same time, a road expansion 50 kilometers away threatened to divert truck traffic away from Gaakwen. Throughout the township, fresh construction anticipated a prosperous future, even as uncertainty about that future grew.



The parking strip, Gaakwen, 2016

In my early walks to Gaakwen, however, the parking project had not yet begun and the parking area was still rough dirt that became an archipelago when it rained. During the day, this space was mostly occupied by mechanics and welders attending to broken down trucks or other projects. I would wend my way through the activity and around the potholes until I reached the

junction. Then I would turn onto the Elburgon road toward Yasmin's timber shop, where I'd catch up on the events of the morning.

Praise Home

This brief tour offers a glimpse into the mix of mobility and settlement, localization and cosmopolitanism, agrarian and trade-based livelihoods, that characterized Gaakwen. I encountered the settlement as a fascinating admixture—organized at once around the road and the accompanying mobility of both money and people; and around land, with its tendencies to embed both value and social relations. Gaakwen was on the one hand a strikingly cosmopolitan space, an island of ethnic, religious, and even national diversity in the midst of a rural area deeply marked by ethnic claims to land and place. At the same time, the settlement was governed by a clear distinction between *wenyeji* (residents, literally “people of the place”) and outsiders, a division that was both ethnically and spatially marked. Those who claimed the status of *wenyeji* were Kipsigis, most of them from nearby farms. This ethnic association was significant in the context of land contestation in the Rift Valley. To say that Gaakwen was a Kipsigis town was also to speak of a long history of conflict and displacement in the area.

Both tendencies were visible along the roadside, if one knew how to look. The diversity might strike a passing traveler first: Gaakwen's roadside businesses revealed not only the variety of tastes to which its services appealed, but also the diverse origins of investment. The truck stop attracted capital from diverse sites drawn together by the highway: from the coast, where most trucking companies were based; local capital from the nearby town of Nakuru; international investment from Uganda, where many trucks were headed; and even capital accumulated *on* the

road. At the same time, businesses named “Boror,” “Sumeek,” “Gwakeen,” and “Konoin,”—Kipsigis names taken from villages near Gaakwen or from sites in Kericho, the former Kipsigis “native reserve”—spoke to more local, and localizing, attachments.¹²¹

This chapter unpacks the duality at the heart of Gaakwen by tracing the double history—of the road, and of land—through which a township was built out of agricultural land. In this process, many local smallholders became landlords invested in Gaakwen’s roadside economy of services, trade, and real estate. While Chepseon residents and other nearby villagers had early access to plots and business opportunities in Gaakwen—and thus a large proportion of Gaakwen’s businesses were owned by *wenyeji*—the settlement also grew through investment from outsiders who purchased plots of land, invested in buildings, and established businesses. In its emergence as a node of capital accumulation attracting investment from a diverse assortment of entrepreneurs, Gaakwen operated very much like a city. Yet *wenyeji* retained a social and political control over the space which tied it to its rural origins. This was most visible in the governance role played by the Gaakwen Business Community. This was a collection of primarily Kipsigis landlords who saw their role as fostering development in Gaakwen. This council performed many governance functions, including dispute mediation and punishment (usually through fines or exile).

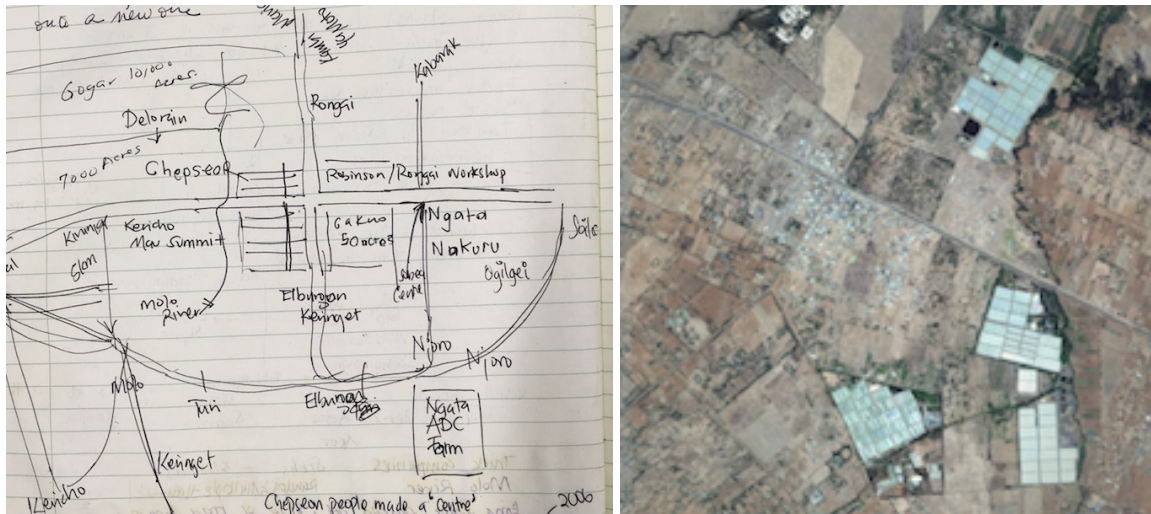
I seek to capture in this chapter the new relationship to belonging and value that Gaakwen has fostered since it began to grow in the early 1990s. In particular, I describe the relationship to new moral and financial configurations that was visible among Gaakwen

¹²¹ Naming businesses after one’s rural home is a common practice across Kenya. There is something interesting, however, about naming one’s business after a village that is mere kilometers away. This suggests an attempt to make visible on the road the hinterland that lies behind it.

landlord-wenyeji as they shifted from a vision of growth tied to agrarian accumulation and local trade to one based on nightlife and speculative increase; and from a vision of belonging based in land and kin relations to one organized around hospitality and stranger-sociability. Here, entrepreneurial attitudes grew up within and were shaped by existing ideas of productivity and profit. Like boda boda riders in Kakamega, Gaakwen's wenyeji were at once risk- and mobility-oriented, while remaining attached to agricultural life and households.

I draw on the problematics of agrarian studies for thinking about the relationship of rural residents to capitalist transformations. Unlike that literature, however, I do not focus here on changes in agriculture, but rather on the transformation of *land itself* into real estate, and the accompanying transformation of (some) former "peasants" into "landlords." Discussions of agrarian transformation have often revealed how capitalist transformations increase "risk" for rural populations—not only by exposing peasants to increased potential for devastating loss but also by introducing a calculus of profit and loss that is called "risk," and shifting the burden of this risk onto individuals (Gidwani 2008; Sethi 2017; Patel 2006). Here, I demonstrate some of the shifts in calculative disposition that accompany rural populations' (partial) disinvestment from livestock and crops and investment into roadside trade and real estate.

In investing in Gaakwen, wenyeji and others came to rely on the truck stop's continued growth. One effect of this shift toward real estate, as I will show, was an increased attachment to state investment. Paradoxically, at the moment of expanded reliance on a market in land and real estate, it was the state that came to be perceived as the source of risk to Gaakwen.



Gaakwen and land. *Left.* Sketch of land ownership around the junction before Gaakwen existed, from my fieldnotes. *Right.* Gaakwen from above. The small shiny roofs at the junction are Gaakwen; the large ones are the flower farms.

II. LAND AND LINES IN THE RIFT VALLEY

What became Gaakwen was initially just an intersection known as the “junction to Rongai.” At the intersection, East Africa’s main east-west highway met two dirt roads: one leading past large colonial-era estates and into the old railway town of Rongai, and the other climbing past smaller landholdings toward the farming center of Elburgon. The first business in what was to become Gaakwen was a kiosk, set up to serve travelers waiting at the junction for transport. Otherwise, farms were all that a passing traveler would find surrounding the junction —on one side, vast agricultural holdings belonging to colonial-era settlers or transferred to their successors in Kenya’s political elite and multinational corporations, on the other, the smaller patchwork of settlement schemes.

In the early 1990s, two historical-economic shifts came together to spark the growth of Gaakwen. These were tied to the dominant, interlinked, logics that have shaped Kenya’s colonial

and postcolonial history: land and lines of transport. Gaakwen emerged at the juncture of the ongoing processes of post-independence (re)distribution of large tracts of land and the deregulation of transport and mobility. In the late 1980s both regimes were in transition, as real estate began to vie with land as a source of value; and as road finally overtook rail as the main means of transporting commodities.

As legend has it, in the late 1960s, a young politician named Wilson Leitich leveraged his relationship with the departing owner of a settler farm in what was then called Rongai, to purchase the land. He won the 2,000-acre farm from under the nose of a women's group from Central Kenya that been in line for the allocation. The son of squatters, Leitich organized a group of residents from his "home" area of Kipkelion in Chepseon, Kericho to form a land-buying company and purchase the farm. Part of Kericho had been the "native reserve" for the Kipsigis after they were dispossessed of their pasture and agricultural lands across the present counties of Kericho and Bomet, and parts of Nakuru and Narok. Although the original Chepseon was itself a resettlement scheme, the land allocations had been insufficient and families were again looking to stretch out.

The Chepseon case is somewhat of an outlier in the more traditional story around those who bought into land-buying companies after independence and "resettled" the central highlands of the Rift Valley. These companies, in which a group of shareholders—usually smallholder farmers—pooled money and took loans to buy out departing settlers, were one of the means by which land was transferred after independence. The land-buying companies were one among several different ways that land was re-allocated, which included government-managed "settlement schemes" for poor and landless peasants as well as land sales of large farms to

middle and high income buyers.¹²² While I do not have space to address the full complexity of land allocations here, two aspects are notable. First, land redistribution did little to undo the historical imbalances of colonial settlement, as politically-connected elites acquired massive landholdings from departing settlers. Second, historical or ancestral claims to land that had been alienated in the Rift Valley were rejected in favor of a “willing buyer, willing seller” principle, which determined that land would be redistributed through the market.¹²³ The Kalenjin and Maasai, who claimed ancestral rights to the central highlands of the Rift Valley as its “original residents” and as those who had lost the most land under colonial resettlement, were not major participants in these settlement processes. Their resentment at not having regained their land continues to be a feature of Kenyan land politics.

Wilson Leitich, then, was relatively unusual as a *Kalenjin* land broker, and a successful one. He claims to have resettled many Kericho residents in the Nakuru area—so many, in fact, that he lost political influence in his home area of Kipkelion because he had effectively resettled his entire political base.¹²⁴ So it was that a group of Chepseon residents moved down the valley

¹²² Following the lead of the settler dominated New Kenya Party, and drawing on the logic of land as a productive asset, the Kenya African National Union (KANU) made the Kenyatta made ‘willing buyer, willing seller’ (WBWS) principle a feature of its independence negotiation position. In the historiography, there are two conflicting interpretations of its intention. One frames it primarily as being about ethnicity, arguing that WBWS was a means of legitimizing the right of ‘willing buyers’ to purchase the ‘ancestral lands’ of others (Hornsby 2013). Another frames this as a class question. In this reading, WBWS is said to have reduced the government’s commitment to the resettlement of landless populations through settlement schemes by allowing elites access to large quantities of land (Leys 1975). Since both the settlement schemes and WBWS facilitated the resettlement of the Rift Valley by non-‘ancestral’ populations, this second argument claims that WBWS was intended to preserve the class structure of the colonial economy, with a native bourgeoisie replacing departing settlers of British descent as custodians of large-scale farms. Indeed, the KANU-led shift away from land redistribution as a framework for justice in the independence transition period also dispossessed many poor Gikuyu. The third argument was based on fears that an economic collapse would result from too quick a transition, and that the settlers should be compensated or persuaded to stay on. In its current usage, however, WBWS stands in for both things—both as the means by which the poor were dispossessed of land, and as a means by which Gikuyu claimed rights to settle in the Rift Valley.

¹²³ The specific mechanisms of of land redistribution were varied. Some farms were simply sold, and thus purchasing power and connections determined their distribution. Others were bought by the state—with British credit—to be allocated to the poor and landless via settlement schemes (through which the new settlers were intended to eventually pay for the farms). Many of the beneficiaries of these schemes were Gikuyu who had been squatters on colonial settler farms.

¹²⁴ “Wilson Leitich - 16 years later.” *Daily Nation*, August 11, 2006.

from Kericho County to Nakuru County, and the land adjacent to the Gaakwen intersection became “New Chepseon” or just Chepseon. Leitich also moved, becoming a councillor (the most local-level political office) in Rongai Ward in 1983. The New Chepseon land turned out to be not very good for farming, but the growing number of trucks that were stopping at the junction made roadside businesses an attractive alternative.

By the late 1980s, the residents of Chepseon and the neighboring villages had grown in number and felt they needed to construct a “center,” an area for shopping and trade. Their old patron and now neighbor, Leitich, had won the Rongai Ward seat in the 1983 election. A skillful political operator, Leitich had made a land baron of himself. With the political shifts as a new president got into office, he became Chairman of the Nakuru County Council. He persuaded the council that it was in the public interest to purchase fifty acres of land at the junction to Rongai and gazette it as a “shopping center”—i.e. a cluster of shops. This fifty-acre piece of land was purchased from its previous owner (the first president’s cook), and then divided into plots that the council leased out as business locations. Several residents of New Chepseon applied for allocations, while others continued to convert existing Chepseon land across the road into business locations. They began the transition from landowners to landlords.

The argument for making a shopping center at Gaakwen was linked to the Rift Valley’s history of ethnically-inflected land tensions. Enduring resentment around land redistribution and the post-independence “re-settlement” of the Rift Valley polarized the two dominant ethnic coalitions in the area, Gikuyu and Kalenjin, leading to repeated bouts of land related conflict. What were low intensity skirmishes in the 1980s blew up into widespread conflict and ethnic cleansing as the lobbying for multi-partyism ruptured the fragile elite accommodations that had

kept the pot on the lid for the preceding three decades. As populations realigned into zones of increasing ethnic homogeneity, the residents of New Chepseon and other nearby villages wanted Gaakwen to become a shopping center for the Kalenjin. The nearest existing shopping centers, Rongai, Mau Summit, Elburgon, and Molo were perceived to be Gikuyu-controlled. Its success, however, did not quite take the expected form. Increasingly low surpluses meant that rural demand for market commodities was low. Instead, Gaakwen's trade came from the road and its circulations. The expansion of trucking and trucker traffic propelled an unplanned growth that far exceeded the scope of a rural shopping center. Far from serving an ethnically determined hinterland, Gaakwen became an island of security and opportunity for a diverse assemblage of entrepreneurs and marginal people from all over Kenya and even East Africa.

Gaakwen's rapid expansion is thus also tied to a second historical process: the displacement of the railway by the road as the primary channel for commodity transport. Under colonial authority, both road building and truck-based cargo transport were restricted, in order to prevent trucking from competing with the railway. But after independence, road improvements and increased licensing of truck transport (linked in part to certain politicians' interest in the business of trucking) led to a growth in the trucking industry (Ogonda 1992b). Road and rail competed until the late 1980s when, as part of the structural adjustment austerity reforms, the state-owned Railways Corporation was substantially downsized and its subsidies cut. These fee structure shifts made railway freight more expensive and allowed trucking to definitively win the "rail vs road" struggle that had been ongoing in Kenya since the 1920s (Government of Kenya 1927). The relative importance of Rongai and Gaakwen mirrors this transport history. Rongai, a

nearby railway station town, lost importance throughout the 1990s and 2000s, while Gaakwen (once just “the junction to Rongai”) grew rapidly.

The long-distance trucking economy produced different work patterns from the railway economy, and in turn, required separate infrastructures to facilitate them. Drivers spend a considerable portion of their life on the road, and require roadside stops for rest, food, ablutions, diversion and companionship. Fulfilling these needs demands a spatially dispersed infrastructure. Mirroring the liberalized nature of the trucking economy, the spaces that grew up to service long-distance trucking in Kenya were almost entirely self-constructed. Where the railway’s employees often lived in camps or housing projects built by the Railways Corporation (housing which vies with the railway itself for the position of most important infrastructural trace of the railway’s influence), the long-distance trucking economy produced a proliferation of small roadside settlements. And unlike railways infrastructure, whose main nodes were largely urban-focused, truck stops often sprang up in areas where the highway passed through rural areas. These roadside settlements did not belong to the road alone but offered points of mutual access between rural hinterlands and the road. As one writer somewhat disapprovingly remarks of East African truck stops in contrast to their U.S. counterparts, drivers “melt into dispersed settlements where these services and amenities are scattered” (Marck 1999: 97).

On the one hand, then, Gaakwen grew up as a rural trading center, serving surrounding smallholder farms; on the other, its location along East Africa’s most trafficked transport corridor made it a hub for more mobile relations. These two elements came together to produce a kind of frontier. This was true in an economic sense (Chalfin 2004), as a largely agrarian economy

organized around the production of grain and milk came together with a road-based hospitality economy. Surrounding farms provided Gaakwen with milk, meat, produce, and maize, and the truck stop was a vital source of farm inputs. In addition, residents worked as cooks, waited tables, made conversation and drank strangers they would never have met otherwise. But it was also a frontier in a more “Wild West” kind of way.¹²⁵ Gaakwen had the buzz, the sense of opportunity, of a gold rush town. This perception was strengthened by Gaakwen’s self-built grit, its permissive approach to practices that were frowned upon elsewhere, and a sense of being only intermittently visible to the state.

But the novelty of the truck stop generated a seduction that provoked anxiety. If Gaakwen attracted local produce, it also attracted farmers, who came to visit its bars and night clubs. Elders began to worry about youth who found the township’s offerings a welcome diversion from the drudgery of chores. Its trucks facilitated migrations away, and cash rich drivers might “lure” young women with promises of rescue. Fears grew around the town’s destruction of local social mores.

The sense of wanting to simultaneously access Gaakwen’s economy while also keeping it apart from surrounding farms and villages reflected a wider sense of uncertainty surrounding how mobile socialities should interact with settled ones. Writing of truck stops along Sudan’s Forty Days Road, Beck describes them as a kind of “membrane” between rural areas and the road. He argues that truck stops serve as “gateways” to small towns and rural areas but also restrict interaction between them. “Mediating between residents and strangers,” they “open a welcoming space for traveling strangers from the road” and at the same time “shield both road

¹²⁵ Crazy Monday Correspondent, “Gaakwen Town: Kenya’s Wild West.” *Daily Nation*, October 18, 2010.

and roadside from each other” (Beck 2013). Gaakwen’s spatial and social formations were similarly calculated to both facilitate and constrain the interaction between the highway and the rural areas alongside it. The space that truckers could access was limited to the businesses directly along the road—rarely did trucker-oriented business go any deeper into the township. A friend who used to run a small shop along the highway and lived in the township told me that she thought of going onto the highway as “going to Gaakwen,” even though where she lived was no more than five hundred meters from the road. And significantly, Gaakwen’s *wenyeji* spoke of what the truck stop offered as the “hospitality” offered by Kipsigis to outsiders—suggesting that while outsiders were welcome, they were also temporary.

The Chepseon landowners, whose farms essentially turned into Gaakwen, thus found themselves in the position of hosts both to the truckers and to the diverse population that arrived in Gaakwen to serve or exploit them. And in the process, many of them also became landlords, brokers, investors, or business owners. Many of the Chepseon landowners (and those Kipsigis who bought land in Chepseon from the original settlers) operated some kind of business in Gaakwen. These ranged from clubs and groceries, to timber yards and repair workshops. They owned these alongside a wide range of “outside investors,” but maintained a guiding hand over the development of the township through the Gaakwen Business Community. The SBC was controlled by the “landlords” of Gaakwen (as they were called). Many of them were from Chepseon, and took turns holding office in the Community’s council. They policed the space and its “development,” guiding the different trades to whom they leased space, and fiercely guarding the town’s reputation as a safe haven for truck drivers. They also marked the space as Kipsigis territory, no matter how cosmopolitan.

Pathfinder

I discuss the evolution of this conflict between Gaakwen and the villages later in this chapter. But I want to consider first how a settlement as permissive as Gaakwen could have grown in a rural space such as this. William's story of arriving in Gaakwen illustrates the way that social mores policed by ethnicity-based institutions intersected with the entrepreneurial possibility offered by Gaakwen's growth, in its early days. William and his family, as mentioned above, were my hosts during my first stay in Gaakwen. William was a keen observer and source of innumerable analytic insights. In his mid 40s, he was one of Saglaa's earliest traders. He belonged both to the Chepseon landowners, enmeshed in relations of ethnicity and rural life, and to Gaakwen's more bootstrap economy. He moved between these categories quite fluidly—William described himself as a “hustler” but also belonged to the Gaakwen Business Community. Even though he had arrived in Gaakwen as an outsider with no land, he had gradually gained the status of *mwenyeji*. This status was attained through his longevity in Gaakwen, and facilitated by the fact that he was Kipsigis. It was cemented by his acquisition of land in New Chepseon where he maintained some of the forms of a “rural” life conducted according to the norms of ethnicity (more on this below).

By the time I met him, William had established himself as an entrepreneur. In addition to an auto repair garage and a timber shop, he owned two mid-sized trucks and offered local transport services. He regularly conducted runs between the town and the nearby quarry, forest, and surrounding estates. William's fortune was entirely built in Gaakwen. He'd grown up on a small farm in Ngata, about ten kilometers from Gaakwen. His father had been a squatter on the

Egerton estate (“Ngata” is a version of “Egerton”)—there he worked as a cattle and sheep herder, and had acquired a small piece of the farm when the estate was liquidated, thus going from squatter to smallholder.¹²⁶ Long displaced from their ancestral home in Kericho, William’s family established a new “home” in Ngata. But William saw farming as a proposition that didn’t reward investment. The family became progressively poorer, as he describes it, because they were torn between agrarian life and the need to invest in the New Kenya of education. The farm and cows couldn’t reproduce fast enough to keep up with the children’s school fees; the rhythms of farm life and tuition demands didn’t align. William describes a pattern familiar in Kenya, in which farm earnings are diverted into school fees (Haugerud 1989).¹²⁷

My dad was a smallscale farmer. To start farming, he had to sell a cow. He would sell a cow, farm, and then the harvest would go to school fees. So then the next year he again had to sell another cow. Because either we would eat the produce or it would go to school fees. It was just marking time, or even going backwards. Because the cow would be sold and then the next year maybe another cow hadn’t been born yet or was too young. But he had to buy fertilizer, seed...¹²⁸

William used “marking time” to argue that farming did not offer opportunities for progress or accumulation. So he was eager to escape farm life and parental discipline. After graduating from secondary school, he moved to Nakuru town and found work as a welder. He welded himself an

¹²⁶ During the process of European settlement, a large proportion of Kipsigis land in the Rift Valley was expropriated and the population was relocated to a reserve. Many Kipsigis found land in the Kericho reserve insufficient for their herds of cattle and became “squatters”—agriculturalists working a piece of settler land in return for grazing and cultivation rights—on settler farms. Unlike squatters from Central Kenya, Kipsigis tended to keep a foot in both worlds—one on the reserve, and one on the farm (Kanogo 1987). For this reason William still considers Kericho his ancestral home even as his family relocated to Ngata. It is said that Kipsigis learned to be maize farmers from their experience working on settler farms.

¹²⁷ As Haugerud points out, education is considered an investment that is worth losing capital assets for, but in the context of declining jobs and increased job-seekers, this might practice might contribute to “net transfer of resources to already more privileged segments of the population (1989:73).

¹²⁸ “My dada alikuwa ni smallscale farmer...At first akianza kulima, lazima auze ng’ombe. Anauza ng’ombe, analima, mazao ikitoka inaenda school fees. So next year tena lazima anauza ng’ombe nyingine. Juu ile product yenye ilitoka either tulikula kwa chakula na nyingine ikaenda fees. So tulikuwa tunaangalia...it was just mark-timing, ama anarudi nyuma. Juu ng’ombe inauzwa na before next year ng’ombe nyingine labda hajazaliwa. Anunue fertilizer, anunue mbegu..”

iron box in which he saved his “coins” as he looked for something to invest in. He was an admirer of “video” (using the expression “kipenda roho” to express how films were, in a loose translation, his heart’s desire). After visiting a cousin on a farm near present-day Gaakwen, which was then just beginning to grow into a center, it occurred to him that this might be a good place to start a “video show” business (usually a one-room set-up showing films and other broadcasts played from video). He bought a small 14-inch television and a VCR and brought them to Gaakwen in 1994. He said that at the time no one else ran a video show in any of the nearby villages or towns (Rongai, Elburgon, Sachangwan), so his devoted audience would come from many kilometers away, walking or by bike.

But the elders of surrounding villages Gaakwen weren’t pleased, believing that “video” was a bad influence, especially on “the youth”—taking them away from herding, farm work, and school. William says that they mistrusted video just because it was new. Elders said “*video ni ya wakora,*” video is for deviants; “*inaonyesha kishetani,*” it is devilish; “*inapoteza watoto wao,*” it sets children on the wrong track. But William felt they were just afraid of what they didn’t understand. Their lack of education, and “exposure,” he said, allowed them to believe rumors of video’s malevolence. The deeper reason for their resistance, according to William, was that the elders simply didn’t understand what one *gained* from watching videos. Film wasn’t sensible within their rural worldview:

The elder knows.. that if you pump money into the farm, it gives you something. So he asks, if you take your eyes and you go to watch there, will you have eaten? He won’t be satisfied with your answer that you have seen something and your mind has grown. He

wants to be able to grasp it. If you've drunk beer or tea, he knows you have *had* it. But to pay just to please your eyes?¹²⁹

The problem was not just the ways that pleasure escapes utilitarian arguments. The elders could understand beer drinking, even if they might criticize the consumption of alcohol by those who were too young.¹³⁰ But film was a pleasure they could hardly even understand as such, and all the more so because one had to pay cash for it.

The elders were persistent in trying to shut William down, sending both the chief and the police to harass and even arrest him. Finally, he embarked on a persuasion campaign. He asked the District Officer, a high-ranking local official charged with overseeing the state's security and development apparatus, to call a participatory meeting (a *baraza*) to "educate" the elders. Employing a range of strategies, William sought to firmly locate video within a civilizational-developmental complex that the community could understand as "good," and, perhaps, "productive." He brought his equipment to a field (now a parking area) and staged a demonstration: he showed videos that helped with exam preparation, videos of pastors preaching, and public health advisory films. Drawing on the trifecta of education, religion, and public health to legitimate and make legible the mysteries of video (even as the bulk of what he actually screened was soccer, action film, and pornography), William mobilized the discourse of

¹²⁹ Yeye anajua...uki-pump pesa fulani kwa shamba, inatoka. So yeye alikuwa anakuuliza ukipeleka macho uende uangalie huko, hautakuwa umekula... hawaridhiki na your answer, ati umeona, akili ikagrow. So yeye anataka kabisa, kama ni kukunywa pombe ama chai, anajua you have taken it. Lakini sasa ati macho peke yake, ati umelipia macho ifurahi.

¹³⁰ Both beer and tea drinking are also social occupations (and even ritual ones), but here I believe William was referencing them in relation to entertainment.

development and modernization, trying to replace the illicit pleasures of entertainment with the developmental promise of educational film units.¹³¹ This display gained him acceptance.

Having triumphed against resistance, William continued his business until a proliferation of “copy-cats” made it financially unsustainable, at which point he moved on to other pursuits (albeit none as close to his heart). Today no one knows, he said, that he was the “pathfinder” who made video possible: “They found a running track already here. They don’t know who did the hard work of clearing the bushes, where I dug the holes....”¹³²

I recount this story at length because it features so many of the themes that made Gaakwen fascinating. At once a rural “shopping center” and a roadside heterotopia, Gaakwen created new possibilities which needed to be adjusted to and accommodated within previously agrarian society. Gaakwen generated changes in the area that decades of rural-urban migration had not: it brought town, with its strangers, its cosmopolitan gatherings, and its mobile pleasures, into the midst of rural space. The video show’s location in Gaakwen spoke to a certain parallel between the circulatory and trans-local possibilities of film, the road, and the market. The censure William faced and the ultimate acceptance he won speaks to the way the truck stop was at once integrated into rural relations and set apart from them. Brian Larkin writes of the way

¹³¹ Brian Larkin describes a similar distinction in Nigeria, where film could be categorized as “*sinima*” (film for entertainment) or “*majigi*” (the educational mobile cinema of colonial development). Larkin makes this distinction in part to demonstrate that film is not just linked to the commodity form but also to political programs of modernization and development. William’s awareness of the distinction between educational and entertainment film underpinned his choices of film demonstration. He even referenced colonial film units explicitly when he said “*nimefanya mobile*”—“I did mobile”—in describing how he would bring his video equipment to the local school to show exam preparation videos. Yet in characterizing the elders’ resistance to video, William’s comments also resonated with Larkin’s further point, which is that despite the differences between *sinima* and *majigi*, both worked to a certain extent as spectacle and entertainment. And more, their parallels reveal the commitment to mobility and circulation that was a *part* of colonial developmentalist modernity. William describing the elders sounded remarkably similar to modernization theorist Daniel Lerner, who argued, as Larkin puts it, that “modernization was not primarily located in economic development or in political organization but in the mental faculties and psychic makeup of individuals... the mental capacity to contemplate a way of life different from one’s own... [to understand] the future as manipulable and open to change” (2008: 117).

¹³² “Wamepata barabara ya kukimbia. Hawajui imefyekwa na nani, nikaziba shimo wapi.” The reference to the clearing of land for the road is itself fascinating in the context of Gaakwen.

that trading centers or markets demarcate the space within which a certain kind of activity is permitted. Drawing a parallel between markets and cinemas, he argues that these “share the symbolic work of defining the moral division of urban space, emphasizing boundaries between different areas and thus different ways of living in the world” (2008: 134). Similarly, the video show’s presence in Gaakwen created new “sets of social and political relations, moral ideas...that are internalized into the routines and habits of everyday life” (ibid.).

A second theme in William’s story—development—asks us to think about *what* social and political relations and moral ideas were being crafted. As he tells it, William mobilized development as a persuasive language that could rhetorically mediate between the intangible value of his video show and the farmers’ desire for familiar signs of growth and worth. Given that what he showed to the elders was not his main repertoire (which tended toward the rather less educational), William’s use of developmental ideas in his persuasive presentation was more or less fiction. Yet it revealed an underlying truth about development: there is a link between “development” and a certain form of modernization—one committed to mobility and connection more than to content; one invested in commodity markets; and one which sought to produce a certain psychic mobility—“the ability to imagine the future as manipulable and open to change” (Larkin 2008:117).

However, in our discussion William also set up a contrast between the help he had received from the state over the question of the video show, and Gaakwen’s abandonment in the present. He repeatedly drew parallels between the video business and Gaakwen, in the sense that both had bad reputations that needed to be overcome in order to grow. (Gaakwen’s reputation as a “black spot,” a site where accidents occur frequently, is further exacerbated by its status as an

HIV “hotspot.”) Yet in contrast to the video show project, where the government (or at least, one D.O.) had assisted William in his program of moving the video show out of the realm of socially unacceptable and into the realm of successful venture, in contemporary Gaakwen, he said, the state refuses to perform this role. Repeated promises of support to Gaakwen had not born fruit and William, together with the Gaakwen Business Community, were beginning to be frustrated and anxious. William feared that without “development”—meaning, state-funded infrastructural intervention—Gaakwen’s flourishing would begin to decline, and with it his investment. Within his narrative, the government’s reluctance to support Gaakwen was the stumbling block in an otherwise very successful entrepreneurial career.

I will return to the relationship of Gaakwen and “development” below. But first, I want to discuss some of the processes through which William became a “local,” and some *wenyeji* became Gaakwen “hustlers.” These include the transformations that made the trading center first a truck stop and then a site of real estate speculation, and during which social norms around business and trade continued to shift. These processes were linked to ongoing transformations in the meaning of land, themselves embedded in the wider history of the Rift Valley’s resettlement following independence.

III. PEASANTS TO LANDLORDS

One afternoon, I was introduced to Robert and Vincent, two of Gaakwen’s “brokers”—young men who facilitated a wide range of transactions between drivers and whomever might want what drivers are selling. I approached the brokers with caution, knowing that the secret

nature of their work made them cagey. However, these two hastened to assure me that they had nothing to hide. All we do is facilitate transactions, Robert said: “willing buyer, willing seller.”

I was struck by his use of these words. The phrase “willing buyer, willing seller” goes back to independence-era discussions around the opening up of the White Highlands to (re)settlement by so-called “African” Kenyans. At that time, the phrase encapsulated the idea that land redistribution should be conducted through the market rather than as a form of reparative justice to restore pre-colonial land ownership. While some land was bought by the government for settlement schemes, the market process also allowed large amounts of land in the Rift Valley to be also transferred to the wealthy—a process in which the Kenyatta family and allies benefitted more than anyone else.¹³³ Many Kipsigis and Maasai, who claimed ancestral rights to the Rift Valley, felt they had been again dispossessed of what was rightfully theirs.

Around the time I met Robert and Vincent, the phrase “willing buyer, willing seller” had been re-introduced into popular discourse when then-presidential candidate Uhuru Kenyatta (the son of Jomo Kenyatta) had made a gaffe during a presidential debate in 2013. When asked about his family’s “province-sized” landholdings, Kenyatta confidently shot back, claiming that they had acquired all their land legitimately: “willing buyer, willing seller.”

At the time of the debate, Kenyatta was on trial at the International Criminal Court for his involvement in the 2007-2008 post-election violence. The fighting had been particularly brutal in the Rift Valley largely because of lingering resentments over “outside” settlement on the ancestral land of the Rift Valley peoples. Even in rural areas, populations had more than doubled

¹³³ Nevertheless, Kenyatta won the election. Having made an alliance with William Ruto—also on trial for crimes against humanity, but who had been on the other side during the violence—Kenyatta mobilized a sense of “victimization” by the Hague and the international community in his favor.

since independence and as urban jobs dried up, rural incomes dwindled and inequality grew, the country was full of bitterness. Kenyatta's claim that his family had legitimately acquired land because they had purchased it on the market thus seemed spectacularly ill-timed, given that the violence and subsequent Hague trial had reminded critics of the double untruth of this statement. First because "the market" was a dubious source of property legitimacy given ancestral and other kinds of claims that competed with it as a means of establishing rights over land. And second because Kenyatta senior, as independence president, had access to land during the resettlement period in ways that even other wealthy Kenyans did not.

After the debate the phrase circulated around the country like a meme—for some as mockery of Kenyatta but also, for many, as the expression of a now-settled ideological position (in favor of free markets in land). The irony of Robert using the phrase in Gaakwen was particularly intense, as the settlement abutted truly vast estates owned by the Kenyatta family and allies, descendants of the earliest settlers, the family of second president Moi, and other political elites. More, Gaakwen had been sharply affected by the election related ethnic violence of 2008, and despite a later pact between the opposing sides in the form of the present governing coalition, resentments against land ownership by "outsiders" lingered. As someone identifying as Kipsigis, Robert was among those who could claim to be *wenyeji*—those who, even they possessed land bought on the market, could *also* make an ancestral claim to that land. But his use of "willing buyer, willing seller" to explain the validity of his own "business" as a mediator did not come across to me as ironic. Rather, Robert espoused Gaakwen's wider commitment to "free" markets, entrepreneurialism, and cosmopolitan growth. That he did so with a reference to the most contested commodity in Kenya's history, land, was not mere chance. Indeed, precisely

because of the significance of the decision that land ownership should be based on the capacity to purchase, market ideologies are crafted around land. In this case, economic ideology worked together with political circumstance to produce Robert's statement: one in which "the market" should be free of ethnic or even moral entanglements.

Robert was expressing here an extreme position on the spectrum of views regarding the conduct of trade and the sale of land in Gaakwen. Many of Gaakwen's traders echoed him in declaring that relations in Gaakwen were built fundamentally on "business," rather than on social ties. But Robert's reference to land-derived logic even in a discussion of *other* commodity flows hinted at the stifled persistence of the social aspects of land ownership. This spectrum thus reflects the patchwork way in which Rift Valley residents have refashioned attachments to land under market conditions and the varied ways in which they encounter the market more generally. Robert's liberal position on market relations did not, in fact, reflect the reality of his working conditions or those of Gaakwen more generally. He benefited from the way in which ethnicity structured access to certain opportunities in Gaakwen. Illicit brokerage was a highly protected profession within the truck stop. The brokers operated as a kind of guild, with barriers to entry and a code of conduct enforced by fines, expulsion from the settlement, and even death. While people from all over Kenya opened businesses of various kinds in Gaakwen, they were (with the exception of a single ethnic Gikuyu broker) not permitted to enter the brokers' "guild." This likely had to do with the fact that brokerage required a detailed knowledge of a submerged cartography of warehouses, potential buyers, and social accountability. But it also reflected the fact that some of Gaakwen's more lucrative occupations were reserved for Kipsigis. Similarly, as I have noted, the status of *mwenyeji*, limited to Kipsigis, was required to take part in the

Gaakwen Business Community's leadership. Thus ethnically inflected lines between *wenyeji* and outsiders were preserved even as the actual ownership of land and buildings in Gaakwen became more diverse; and *wenyeji* themselves became involved in occupations (like owning bars and lodgings) that engaged temporalities and socialities far removed from former agrarian identities.

In Jane Guyer's effort to think about how non-capitalist commercial processes interact with capitalist processes, she draws on Keith Hart, who argues that "instead of thinking in binary fashion about 'types' of economic system...one should think about a set of 'steps' towards greater abstractness of the commodity form, whose permutations and combinations are historically configured in varying ways" (Guyer 1998:21). The notion of "steps" is quite useful for thinking about land in Kenya, where its status as a commodity can vary quite widely. Here, I focus on land that is understood simultaneously as a commodity and as territory invested with ethnic meanings. The "step" I want to think about is one in which agricultural land becomes real estate. How and with what effects was land invested with agrarian and ethno-spatial meanings transformed into real estate made valuable largely by the mobile relations of the highway? What forms of futurity were erased and what forms made possible in the shifting notions of productivity and growth that accompanied Gaakwen's growth? And how were these shifts affected by already-evolving social relations? (The decision of women *not* to marry, or to leave their marriages, for instance?)

Plots

Much like the land use changes that one can observe at urban peripheries, as the city eats into rural space, agricultural land's transformation into real estate in Gaakwen was a process of

subdivision. In the course of this division, the unit of measurement also changed. Land previously sold in the unit of the acre became real estate sold by the “plot.” Unlike the acre, the “plot” is not a fixed measurement. Even the question of whether there exists a standard rate of conversion from plot to acre was indeterminate: in some places there existed a standard for conversion, in some places not. For instance, in Nairobi, a “plot” simply meant a piece of land for building on. It carried no implication of size. In Kakamega, the term “plot” *could* carry quantitative significance, described as a percentage of an acre, but the percentage varied. In one place I was told that an acre was four plots; in another it was eight. In Gaakwen, William told me, an acre equals ten plots.¹³⁴

If the variability of “plot” suggests that this measurement is locally and socially determined, the transition from acre to plot nevertheless symbolizes the growing dominance of exchange value over use value. When I asked the price of an acre in Gaakwen, I was repeatedly told that it was impossible to buy an *acre*. Land was only sold by the “plot,” as this would yield more profit. William put it succinctly: “As you get closer to the highway or to town, we don’t talk about acres, we are talking about *plots*. People want [to sell in] plots so they can make more money.” I encountered the same response in inquiring about the acre price of a large piece of fallow land for sale next to the highway, at the edge of Gaakwen—“we are selling by the plot.” And again about land in a settlement scheme a bit further down the road. There, I was told that the farms were initially two acres but now being subdivided and re-sold as “plots”—in this case, quarter-acre parcels.

¹³⁴ However, two of those “plots” are for feeder roads. So, including the roads, an acre gives you eight plots. The plot in this calculation is an abstracted portion of the total acre, rather than a representation of an actual piece of land (since, of course, the feeder roads are spread out over the total acreage).

As my friend Yuda told me, in explaining how land owners divided larger tracts of land and sold them off as plots, Gaakwen is no one's original home.¹³⁵ "Most business and land owners are not locals," he said, "Gaakwen is a cosmopolitan area." This statement, made by an outsider, might be rejected by someone who could claim to be a *mwenyeji*. Nevertheless, the logic was revealing. By equating Gaakwen's seeming urban-ness with the way that land has been divided and sold, and then further rented, to people from many different parts of country, Yuda brought together several transitions: larger to smaller land sizes; ethnic "ownership" to ethnic diversity; inherited land to salable property. Each of these transitions is contained in the shift to the "plot"—as well as, I will argue below, a new understanding of value in speculative terms.

In addition to the transition from acres to plots something else was happening in Gaakwen. Residents were not only talking about buying a plot for the purpose of building a house or starting a business, they were talking about buying plots for the purpose of retaining them for sale at an opportune time. A process of localized speculation was taking shape. Conversations about rising prices were everywhere in Gaakwen. Take two examples:

Near the guest house I sometimes stayed in, on the north side of the highway, was a makeshift kiosk run by an ethnic Somali trader and his wife. My partner and I sometimes chatted with their son Abdi, a sparky teenager full of teenage impulses: girls, drugs, parties and long absences from his household duties. One night we were talking about the future of Gaakwen when Abdi gestured behind him to an as-yet undeveloped part of Gaakwen. He recommended that we buy a plot there. Land values were going up, he said, and we could make a lot of money selling it later. I found it remarkable that even he, a teenager with no resources, was plugged into

¹³⁵ He used a more interesting formulation, in fact, saying: "no one can claim Gaakwen is their natural habitat."

the excitement of land trade, calculating shifting values, and arranging deals. He seemed captivated by the possibilities of the town's future, while also feeling himself excluded from them.

Another time, when out on a walk, an older contractor friend told me a story about the land we were passing just a short ways up the hill from Gaakwen. Omondi said that an ethnic Gikuyu man had been granted something like three thousand acres of land by Kenyatta senior. Local Kalenjin protested the injustice of his large landholding, and threatened him. Decades later, in the aftermath of a round of land-clashes, he decided to sell off the land, at a rate far below market price ("two acres at 180,000 shillings") and said he would help buyers get title deeds for the sub-divisions. But his land-hungry Kalenjin neighbors still resented his possession and didn't want to give him that benefit. They refused to take him up on his offer. Instead, "outsiders" in the shape of a dairy firm did. Now, Omondi said, the land was hundreds of times more valuable than those sale prices. This was an apocryphal tale, not to be taken for its accuracy. His point was that the Kalenjin—nursing a land grievance—missed an opportunity to buy into discounted property of great quality and appreciating value through their reluctance to play in the market. Thus the story also rewrote the meaning of land: land as an object of questions of justice, ancestry, and agricultural productivity was replaced by another, speculative meaning.

William put this in another way. He said that in the old days, if one found land available for sale, "you would go and tell your people, and you would buy it together. But now you buy it by yourself, so that you can break it up into plots and sell it." As part of this juxtaposition with the past, he said everything had become "business." "In the old days, a shilling was a shilling,

there was nothing like interest. Even if you loaned someone money for two years, they would pay you back the same amount.” I didn’t have the sense that William said this with regret.

Rather, like Robert the broker, he seemed to be repeating a given knowledge about Gaakwen. It was clear, however, that the growth of Gaakwen made ongoing processes of class differentiation even starker. Those who were able to invest in a roadside plot, and to wait for it to appreciate in value, became wealthier than those who were not.

This sense of value unmoored from social and community relations was associated with the highway and the potential it carried for new kinds of value. In Gaakwen, William said, “the highway means money. There [the land farther away from the highway] is bronze but here is gold.” I found it intriguing that in these conversations, the futurity of real estate was expressed simultaneously as potential (what value could become) and as a loss (the missed chance to access value that could have been; the loss of older forms of relation). This futurity relied on a vision of growth that was fundamentally dependent on the market, and entrenched a logic of appreciation.

While William described the transition to the “plot” as a disembedding from the social bonds that were once central to land acquisition, an examination of the businesses along the road, and Gaakwen’s governance more generally, paints a more complicated picture. In fact, attachments to real estate both worked through and transformed existing kin and neighborly relationships. A cataloguing of the plots along the highway revealed that ownership was split between *wenyeji* and “outsiders.” Of the *wenyeji* who owned roadside plots in Gaakwen, and who had developed buildings on them, many had been previously involved in brokerage or in road work of some kind. Some were former brokers of agricultural products—middlemen who bought grain directly from farms, processed it, and then sold at retail prices; others were dealers

in the unregulated fuel market; and one was a timber broker, involved, so the rumors said, in illicit deals with the trucks that transported timber from a nearby forest.¹³⁶ Title in land, the construction of building, and the status of “landlord” cleansed the income accumulated from these legally questionable pursuits, and granted their owners the legitimacy of successful business.

Gaakwen was also notable for the number of women who owned or managed businesses along the highway. Many of these women were the daughters of Chepseon families. For instance Sawe, an elder and then chairman of the Gaakwen Business Community, had a restaurant that was run by his daughter. In another notable case, three sisters owned shops along the highway. Their father was a Chepseon landowner and former civil servant who had set them up in business with his post-structural-adjustment retrenchment money. Additionally, Wilson Leitich’s daughter (with his fourth wife, for whom Leitich had bought land in Chepseon) owned a bar and lodging directly at the junction. Among the wenyaji, many businesses in Gaakwen were run by the wives and daughters of local villagers. Several of these daughters, like many women in Gaakwen, were divorced or unmarried. Thus even as Gaakwen real estate worked through existing neighborly relations, as a converted form of land, it also allowed a new social possibility, in which women owned and managed properties, to emerge. In contrast with family landholdings which were embedded in the domain of the patriarch by the joint requirements of the cultural and individual titling system, the “plot” could be the independent woman’s domain.

¹³⁶ I do not write in depth about the timber trade in this dissertation, but several people I spoke to participated to a degree in an industry that depended on mixing timber of various origins and passing it off as all legal. As with other commodity trades in Gaakwen, it amalgamated farm produce, pilferage, and trade in salvage from the road. This was a vital source of capital accumulation for the town, and although irregular and unreliable it brought large pay days for those who participated in it. Indeed, the forest should perhaps be the third historical force in this story: land, road, forest.

In the next two sections, I further explore the question of how real estate accumulation worked through and against existing social forms. First, I consider how real estate mediated between selfish accumulation and “development” of a kind that could be understood as socially reproductive. I look into how this mediation resembles and diverges from the role of cattle in the socio-economic ideology of Kipsigis society. In the following section, I describe wenyeki’s ambivalent response to sex workers. I show that even as the labor of sex workers was a fundamental element of Gaakwen’s growth and accumulation, wenyeki invented social mechanisms for hiding their dependency on this labor.

IV. OF CATTLE, MAIZE, AND PLOTS

One of the insights of peasant studies has been the notion that competing systems of production and valuation interact in complicated ways: agrarian life does not give over in any simple or uniform way to marketization, calculation, and selfish accumulation. However, the peasant studies debate has primarily focused on trajectories in which land-based social relations preceded capitalist ones. The history of the Kipsigis’ integration into cash markets offers a useful reminder of spatially and historically contingent relationships to agriculture. On the eve of colonization, the Kipsigis were an agro-pastoral group, with semi-settled agricultural activities in the highlands of the northern Rift Valley, and grazing areas relatively nearby in the central lowlands. By the end of the colonial period, they were considered Kenya’s most “progressive” farmers (Omwoyo 2000). In Kenyan history, the “progressive farmer” is the farmer-entrepreneur

who has fenced off land, uses intensive farming methods, and maximizes profit. Thus the Kipsigis became settled agriculturalists and entered the market at the same moment. Agricultural productivity, profit, and property became linked in ways that lay the groundwork for ongoing processes of class formation.

The colonial government saw the “depastoralization” of the Kipsigis as one of their greatest successes in agrarian reform. The Kipsigis were the group that suffered the most from colonial land alienation, having lost by some estimates 170,000 square acres of grazing and farmland to settler mixed farms and tea estates. Colonial reports repeatedly lament the degradation of land on the Kipsigis reserve in Kericho as the result of cattle overpopulation. The Kipsigis initially resisted colonial administrators’ attempts to reduce herd sizes and end stock, and to force men into wage and roadbuilding labor. Cattle were the form in which Kipsigis accumulated wealth and they were extremely reluctant to give up their livestock (Anderson 1986). Many chose to become squatters on settler farms in exchange for grazing rights on these vast and under-utilized estates. However, by independence, the Kipsigis had not only been largely “depastoralized” but were producing large surpluses of maize and wheat. A colonial administrator registers this success in 1949:

Since my return from leave I have held agrarian barazas throughout the Reserve and it has speedily become apparent that at long last the Kipsigis have realised that the well-being of the land is the fundamental basis of all economic and political advancement. We have by no means achieved the Millennium, but the questions of limitation of stock and the limitation of arable land are now being faced up to by the tribe, who in the past were apt to shy away from the controversial, yet fundamental, subjects. *We have also for the first time aroused the tribe to face the unpleasant fact that there can never be enough*

land for all to cultivate, with the result that hundreds of men are now putting down their names to go to Kabete for training.¹³⁷

As Marx points out, primitive accumulation entails not only the process of separating producers from the land to become “free labor,” but also the ideological work by which the violence is forgotten and the relationship made natural—in the form of “an anecdote about the past” (Marx 1992:873). Here, the ideological work of erasing the violence of this process is accomplished simply by using the passive voice: *there can never be enough land for all to cultivate*.

One feature of the Kipsigis’ transition to maize farming was that symbols of value no longer aligned with regimes of accumulation. Even as they became farmers, Kipsigis retained their attachment to cattle, which continued to play an important role in rites of passage and as a symbol of wealth, if not as a store of value. This divergence produced, in fact, a differentiation even within the category of “cattle.” In his 1939 ethnography of the Kipsigis, J.G. Peristiany notes a distinction between “grade” cattle whose milk can be converted to cash, and “native” or *kienyeji* cattle. *Kienyeji* cattle produce milk for family consumption (not for sale), and are used in bridewealth ceremonies and for other rituals (Peristiany 1939).¹³⁸ Even as maize and milk became primary sources of cash acquisition, *kienyeji* cattle continued to symbolize the kind of value that could underwrite the reproduction of the family and the community. Many Kipsigis

¹³⁷ “Agrarian Policy,” Kericho Provincial Commissioner Minute, May 4, 1949, PC/NZA/3/13. “Kabete” refers to the location of the Jeanes School, established to offer training in rural community development, including teaching, agricultural methods, hygiene, and industrial skills. After WWII the Jeanes School was reopened to train Community Development Officers. As Mary Ciambaka Mwiandi writes, “The graduates of Jeanes School were expected to assist the colonial government in its campaign of progress in the rural areas in an attempt to keep the youth from moving to towns to cause trouble” (2006:151).

¹³⁸ “Grade” cows, imported breeds that were raised for meat or milk production, produces milk that was convertible into cash. This cash was usually invested in the purchase of more grade cattle, but grade cattle could not be converted to social status in the way that “indigenous” (*kienyeji*) cows could. *Kienyeji* cows were also bought and sold at market, but their milk was for drinking and not for sale (and they produced less of it); they were the cows used in marriage payments and sacrificed for initiation ceremonies. Only “indigenous” cows could underwrite changes in status.

place names, symbols, and rituals refer to cattle and their husbandry and to formerly migratory lives. Cattle have remained essential to the rituals through which Kipsigis identity is reproduced, especially marriage and circumcision.

Here, I focus on the more recent transformation I observed in Gaakwen: the displacement of the symbolic role of cattle in representing reproductive value, and their (partial) replacement by the “plot” as both source of accumulation and symbol of development and social continuity. In order to understand the implications of this shift, however, it is useful to further examine the role of cattle as an object of dispute.

Both colonial and postcolonial officials invested in “development” considered large herds of cattle to be “unproductive.” (Even as they were able to reproduce cattle, they didn’t reproduce money well.) Because the Kipsigis were targeted for depastoralization, the colonial government’s emphasis on “productivity” in the terms of agrarian capitalism was doubly significant. This productivity logic entailed viewing the land as a potential source of cash and of exchangeable surplus and also re-defining cattle as “unproductive” unless they were being kept for dairy production. Too many cattle were “destructive” to the land and represented an *excess* that could not function as a productive *surplus*. Here, money’s reproductive capacities are not contrasted with those of animals and crops; rather, agriculture-qua-commodity production is contrasted with cattle and the needs of semi-pastoralist living. This history complicates a binary in which agricultural visions of growth are contrasted with the market, as part of a shift from “idealized agricultural, kin-based system of production and circulation to one based on cash and markets” (Smith 2008:75). The history of Kipsigis “depastoralization” shows that “household production” and “agricultural productivity” came into being *alongside* cash crops and markets in

the colonial context. In the late colonial period in Kenya, the aim of government was not only to force people into wage labor (though this was also an aim) but also to transform rural areas into efficient and productive spaces.¹³⁹

Furthermore, large herds of cattle were incompatible with the process of enclosure that took place across the reserve as Kipsigis took up maize farming (Daniels 1980), reflecting at a smaller scale the tensions between colonial development and pastoralism more generally: pastoralists did not fit easily into the territorializing regimes of the state. Even as postcolonial economic development replaced colonial civilizational development as the language of reform, cattle remained under attack for their perceived unproductiveness. This attack merged an elite discourse against “backwards” pastoralists with an ongoing understanding of “productivity” as at once agricultural and market-oriented. See, for instance, this exchange in Parliament from 1993, in which the former Provincial Commissioner of the Rift Valley and then MP, Isaiah Mathenge, accuses people grazing cattle by the roadside both of spreading disease and of causing accidents. Given that Mr Mathenge had become wealthy by “land grabbing” in the Rift Valley, and that he was an ethnic Gikuyu (i.e. a group considered to be non-pastoralist and also usurpers in the Rift Valley), this did not go over well:

Mr Kamuyu: Mr Temporary Deputy Speaker, Sir, the hon. Member has just said that some livestock keepers graze their animals by the roadside. I would like to inform him that they do it because they have no alternative. I wonder if they can be allowed to graze their animals in the forests rather than grazing them at the roadside, because there is a scarcity of land.

Mr Mathenge: Mr Temporary Deputy Speaker, Sir, if people have no land, they why do they want to own cattle? If one has no land to keep his cattle or sheep he should look for

¹³⁹ The 1954 Swynnerton Plan was a policy aimed at intensifying “African” agricultural production. It removed restrictions on farming of cash crops like coffee and emphasized land enclosure and consolidation and private title with the goal of allowing farmers to generate cash income. In part a response to the Mau Mau emergency, the reforms expanded with the goal of creating a “stable peasantry” (Okoth-Ogendo 1978).

a better alternative, rather than to keep cattle that are unproductive. If it is the question of ownership of an animal, then it should be that you own an animal as a means of earning money. An animal must be equated with money. We should be able to keep few cows that bring in a lot of income.

Mr Sankori: Mr Temporary Deputy Speaker, Sir, may I know whether the hon. Member has any interest in poor people because a person who grazes his animals by the roadside does so by survival instinct and not by luxury?

Mr. Mathenge: Mr Temporary Deputy Speaker, Sir, it would not be objectionable for a man to graze his animals at the roadside, but on the part of the roadside that is projecting from his own farm. Nowadays, we find people moving with their cattle and grazing them on the roadside against other people's lands.

Mr. Kamuyu: Mr Temporary Deputy Speaker, Sir, is hon. Mathenge in order to suggest that the nomadic communities do not know anything about grazing cattle in the right way?

In addition to its more evident class and cultural tensions, this exchange offers an intriguing vision of the road as the site for the remainders of nomadic life. In spite of views like Mathenge's, roadsides (and forests) continued to offer pasture for the cattle of the rural poor in both parts of western Kenya in which I conducted research.¹⁴⁰ But more to the point, Mathenge's vision of cattle as a resource that should only be used productively also suggested that the project of depastoralization was ongoing. As Meillassoux (1981) writes, primitive accumulation and the naturalizing of class relations are not something that happens once and then ends. The project is ongoing, and built into the racializing structures of the state.

Self-depastoralization

¹⁴⁰ One of the largest landholders in the country, Mr Mathenge was trained at the University of East Africa at Makerere, and at Cambridge. He was a brutal enforcer for the colonial regime against the Mau Mau, and was nicknamed the "Last Governor of the Rift Valley." His daughter was married into Kenyatta's family. Mr. Sankori here was an MP in the still very pastoralist County of Kajiado, dominated by the pastoralist Maasai.

One of the people I got to know quite well in Gaakwen was a man named James Koech. Koech lived with his family on a small piece of land in Lelechwet, one of the villages on the hill above Gaakwen. The land had been left to him and his brothers by his father, a former squatter, and he now worked it with the help of his wife and children. He also worked overnight as the receptionist in one of Gaakwen's guest houses. I visited him at his home one afternoon, touring his tomatoes and fruit trees, meeting his three cows, and looking through old photos, many of which were taken in Gaakwen in its early days. In numerous photos he appears proudly with his bicycle. Despite having done many other kinds of work, James identified primarily as a farmer—specifically as a tree farmer. Trees are an interesting crop because, due to their long maturation time, many farmers use them as a kind of savings scheme. Furthermore, they take on additional meaning in the context of the Rift Valley's radical deforestation. Perhaps because of his long association with NGOs focused on tree planting, James was not only attentive to the different temporalities and values of different agricultural products, but had acquired a decidedly developmentalist approach to growth and productivity.

As we had tea, he described having recently attended a “seminar” on cattle breeding. He said at a certain point he asked himself why Kipsigis were so attached to cattle. He wondered, Why do we have cows at all? Are we weighing their benefits against their costs? And concluded —“it's better to have one productive cow than ten which are like flowers. *Ng'ombe ni maua ama ni ya kufanya kazi?* (Are cows flowers or are they for work?).” James's echo of the developmentalist approach to cattle was visible even in his choice of cows. They were valuable crossbreeds of Guernseys and local Zebu, and were an investment that allowed John to supplement his daily income with the sale of fresh milk to Gaakwen's hotels.

I believe that in questioning the meaning of cattle James reflected on his own failure to accumulate—wondering, though the contrast between his own life and that of others in Gaakwen who had been more successful, how he could have more successfully accumulated. As a younger man, James had worked for a neighbor named Battalion, who then was a grain trader. In the Gaakwen I knew, Battalion had become the owner of Gaakwen’s largest club, Club Kina, and was a prominent landlord and member of the Gaakwen Business Community. In contrast James—despite having worked in tree farming and as a manager in the nearby flower farms—had been unable to make good on Gaakwen’s promise of accumulation. John expressed no resentment at Battalion’s success, but it was clear that the inequality between them had grown much greater over the years. He aimed, like many others, to earn enough to invest in Gaakwen and thereby to generate a kind of productivity he had as yet failed to achieve.



Battalion’s workers drying grain in Gaakwen, late 1990s. Some of Gaakwen’s first buildings are visible in the background—made out of wood and brick, rather than concrete as they are today.

When James presented his assessment as seeing through a cattle fetish, he participated in an anthropological tradition of thinking about how cattle relate to capitalist value. In her engagement with a debate on “cattle as capital,” for instance, Jean Comaroff argues that while from a materialist perspective cattle cannot be “rigorously” held to be either capital or money, at a symbolic level they serve a purpose similar to money by naturalizing social hierarchies (1985:73). The ritual significance attributed to cattle among Tshidi was both a function of their economic importance and a fetishized obscuring of this very significance. More generally, a cow-attuned strand of economic anthropology indicates that cattle store and reproduce value in socially-embedded ways that are linked both to the way they operate as a unit of measurement, and to their material and lively properties (Comaroff 1985; Keane 1997; Roitman 2005; Shipton 2009).

Here I argue that the question of how cattle store, symbolize, and fetishize value becomes relevant both to understanding how they are being replaced by real estate, and thinking about the meanings of real estate as a form of more-than-economic value. James’s critique of cattle was made easier by the fact that they were already being displaced in practice, even at the symbolic level. In Gaakwen, *plots* and *buildings* had become the “multiplex” object that materializes social relationships, symbolizes status, and naturalizes social hierarchies. Plots and buildings “stored value” in some of the ways that Ferguson describes for cattle in his seminal discussion of the “bovine mystique.” Ferguson notes that for migrant workers in Lesotho cattle functioned as a form of insurance precisely because they were not fully fungible. As stores of value that were invested with cultural and community significance, their value could only be “liberated” under

specific circumstances. They were more durable than cash savings, because they couldn't easily disappear in the day to day needs of household expenses.

Plots are described in similar ways in Gaakwen. As in Ferguson's analysis of cattle, plots and buildings were seen as ways of stabilizing money's mobility because they were less fungible, highly visible, linked to status, and (literally) concrete. Victor, a Gaakwen fuel dealer (a job I discuss at greater length in Chapter Five), made clear that the progression of social status in Gaakwen was linked to roadside real estate. Discussing Gaakwen's landlords (who he called "*wazee wetu*," our elders), he mentioned that many of them started out as "hustlers"—pilfering timber from the forest, dealing in fuel and other commodities, or working as other kinds of middlemen. These "hustlers" had cemented their status in Gaakwen by purchasing plots, constructing buildings, and starting businesses. In the process, they retroactively legitimated their sources of capital. Victor himself noted with pride that he—at the tender age of twenty-three—had earned enough to begin his transition from youth to adult. He had a car, had married, had a small baby, and, most significantly, had bought a "plot." For him, this plot was one of the signs of reproductive success, in addition to being an investment in Gaakwen.

Victor commented on his "development" as an achievement won over and against the dispersing forces of the road and circulation. Echoing the boda boda riders of Chapter Two, he argued that many brokers found it difficult to hold on to money, like truck drivers themselves. He said that "*shilingi ya barabara*," road shillings, don't last. They can be acquired quickly, but this money doesn't stay around. The person who earned a fortune quickly will also lose it quickly. By stabilizing this dispersal into domestic and personal advancement, Gaakwen real

estate and roadside businesses, built out of road money also represented the fixing of value into (re)productive form.

So, much like cattle, real estate both operates as capital and mediates futurity and sociality in symbolic ways. Many real estate partnerships in Gaakwen were built on, and contributed to, decades of friendship. Even as real estate was a speculative investment, building a building in Gaakwen—for those who lived there—was a commitment to the settlement. It said that you and your family intended to be there for a long time and were invested in the progress of the township. Investments in Gaakwen did not offer the kinds of return for their owners that similar investment in nearby Nakuru, or in Nairobi would. Likely, outright speculation on land elsewhere would have been more profitable. Building in Gaakwen resembled what Caroline Melly describes for Dakar, where housebuilding is a means through which to participate in the construction of a future that is itself understood through the experience of continual construction (Melly 2010). As with cattle in Comaroff's analysis, a sense that real estate was at once a productive investment *and* a socially reproductive one partially obscured the fact that their value is linked to the market.

With what effects did this symbolic realignment take place? Marx's insight that attachments are transformed by the form of their mediation has been elegantly applied to analyses of the transition *away* from livestock as social investment—for instance, from cattle to cash as a bridewealth payment. James argues that this shift allowed the bridewealth payment to become a lump sum rather than an ongoing exchange (James 2012), and thus transformed the

nature of the marriage contract.¹⁴¹ In Gaakwen, one effect of the symbolic shift away from cattle is that a male-controlled symbol (cattle) are being replaced by a less gendered one in the form of real estate. Another is the legitimation of previously illegitimate sources of wealth. The fact that Battalion, once a grain broker and fuel dealer,¹⁴² gained status as a landlord and is now an official of the Gaakwen Business Community's leadership council suggests a transformation in mechanisms for achieving prestige and social reproduction.

Thus "plots" provided, for Gaakwen, a means of representing and stabilizing value that (I argue) has largely displaced even the symbolic function of cattle. More, these plots fixed into legitimated form the ambivalent occupations that provided early sources of capital for the growth of Gaakwen. And as with Battalion, they naturalized the emergent class hierarchies that became entrenched (concretized) as peasants became landlords. In the next section, I describe another facet of this emergent class dimension, in relation to landlords' ambivalent relationship with the settlement's sex workers.

¹⁴¹ Comaroff writes: "As both utilitarian objects and media of exchange, [cattle] condensed several levels of signification: they provided an index of individual status within a structure of inequality; they served as a metaphor of stable transformation and social durability; they presented a natural image of the division of labor." (1985:125)

¹⁴² The figure of the rural broker emerged in the shift from collective solutions for agriculture to individual enterprise. After Kenya's independence, many cooperative and mutual societies that had been founded by farmers were taken over or co-opted by the state. This happened through laws that were ostensibly protective, and through the takeover of leadership positions by political appointees rather than farmer representatives. By the late 1980s, many of them were financially delinquent, unable to offer farmers support at the very moment when they should have been the alternative to the retreating state. Their failure manifested in several ways, but the most egregious was their incapacity to make prompt payments for delivered farm produce. Here is where brokers came in. Exploiting an intimacy with the farmers they knew to be under pressure, they offered farm-gate prices far lower than the nominal price controls put in place to protect rural livelihoods. But they paid promptly and as cooperatives and state agricultural agencies piled up farmer debt, local brokers became an increasingly important channel for the marketing of grain, coffee, tea and pyrethrum. In the Rift Valley, where smallholder farmers sold their surpluses to supplement their subsistence, the broker was the entrepreneur who knew the little rural roads well enough to travel from farm to farm in the bounty of the harvest period, offering take-it-or-leave-it prices, adjusted to the level appropriate for a particular homestead's need. They would then accumulate the grain, dry it, and store it up before selling it back to the same farmers at much higher prices in the lean season. There were no prominent grain depots through the years I visited Gaakwen. But the settlement pointed to the legacy of that boom time for them. Former brokers had transferred their accumulations into more enduring real estate. Their capacity to convert local knowledge and cash reserves into massive profits was also transferred into other road work, and is key to understanding the trafficking of illicit fuel and "salvaged" cargo.

V. GAAKWEN BY DAY, GAAKWEN BY NIGHT

Truckers' money is said to "walk around" (*kutemba*) Gaakwen. Gaakwen's fortunes waxed and waned with the flows on the road. Even those who had businesses that didn't directly interact with truckers saw their profits and the economy of the entire town as built on the back of the truckers' spending money. "*Tunategemea barabara*," we depend on the road, was a kind of refrain across the settlement.

What *activated* the circulation of truckers' money was another kind of mobility, that of sex workers. In many ways, sex work underwrote Gaakwen's speculative real estate economy. The central contribution of sex workers to the overall economy of Gaakwen was incontestable. Stories circulated in Gaakwen of times when police crackdowns prevented sex workers from working. These crackdowns were spoken of as barren periods, and their effects were felt far beyond the frontline businesses that hosted truck drivers. Residents told me that drivers chose to skip Gaakwen in favor of other stops, or chose to sleep in their truck cabins rather than in guest houses; money became scarce in the town. It became clear that that the circulation of women was what attracted the circulation of truckers' money.

In speaking of these barren times, residents acknowledged what was otherwise repressed: the very activities that gave Gaakwen a bad reputation were also the source of its success. Attempts to deal with this contradiction were visible among *wenyeji*, who struggled to dissociate themselves from the road, its alternative mores, and its reputation for risk even as they also acknowledged that the road was the source of their livelihoods.

Wenyeji actively worked distinguish their “belonging” to Gaakwen from the activities that made their accumulation possible, especially sex work. One of the central means this was done was by separating day and night. As one resident told me, “during the day, Gaakwen belongs to the wenyeji. But at night we leave it to them.” *Them*—the truck drivers and the sex workers. William, less judgmental about sex work than most other wenyeji, explained how this division worked by offering a *msemo*, a saying: “Night is when the thief steals, day is when the investigator investigates.” This meant two things: on the one hand, that night is for deviance, the day is for law; on the other, that the law has nothing to do if there is no deviance to investigate. The night is the day’s *raison d’être*. But William also said it’s important not to get entangled with the night—he said wenyeji go home by a certain time to avoid crossing a boundary. “There are things you don’t want to see when you are with your child, or with your wife. That’s why we go home early.” Domestic sociality, William implied, was incompatible with Gaakwen’s “night.”

William articulated quite directly the desire of Gaakwen’s wenyeji *not to see* the work that made Gaakwen’s success possible. Hundreds of sex workers worked in Gaakwen. As owners of the facilities that housed sex workers and their clientele, wenyeji were fully aware of what went on at night. But the evacuation of the township after dark allowed them a degree of dissociation from their participation in the trade. The diurnal economy therefore permitted uncomfortable landlords the illusion that they weren’t themselves party to the trade that brought business into their buildings. Gaakwen thus seemed caught between its position as a space of tradition and conformity, and a need for the township to attract truckers from across East Africa.

In the wenyeji conception of sex worker presence, they were outsiders who rode in every night and left in the morning. When pressed, residents offered the explanation that no one would

do such work close to their home. It wasn't that Gaakwen's women were above seeking a living as sex workers, it was just that they wouldn't do it in Gaakwen—close to their kin. But those presenting sex workers as a part of Gaakwen's night life and not of its day life nevertheless had to grapple with the fact that many sex workers lived in Gaakwen—that they rented houses, bought food and clothes, and cared for their children, in the settlement. Thus during the day, wenyaji, particularly women, employed another set of codes by which they distinguished themselves from sex workers. Many ignored them entirely, as though they didn't occupy the same space. Another mwenyaji, who ran a clothing shop, told me that she couldn't ignore the young women who bought from her. Instead, she said that she found them entertaining and recounted, giggling, how they shared sexual techniques and tricks of the trade with her. Around Gaakwen, such stories were shared with a distance and sense of scandal that established that they were the stories of others. Laughing at these women—at their clothing, at their loudness, at their techniques for attracting men, at their drinking habits—was another common strategy of distinction.

The sense that there were two Salgaas—the Gaakwen of the road, and the Gaakwen of the wenyaji—was also projected by sex workers themselves. The performances with which they made themselves visible to customers were of course explicitly intended to set them apart. This included clothing choices, posture, spatial choices, and linguistic registers. They would, for example, employ the poetic coastal Kiswahili of Bongo love ballads, blow kisses, declare their desire, and address passers-by as “baby.” Gaakwen residents criticized women for this exhibitionism, reading it not as a performance but as revealing the promiscuous essence of what made someone a sex worker.

The effort to maintain a distinction persisted into the zone of the night, and even in the very spaces where sex work took place. One night I was interviewing truck drivers on the terrace of a Gaakwen bar when I heard yelling below. Florence, the owner of the bar, was also on the terrace and we both looked over the edge. A drunk woman and the bartender were on the verge of a fight because the latter had confiscated the woman's phone when she didn't pay for a drink. While admiring her bartender's toughness, Florence called down to her to give the phone back. It's bad for business to have a fuss, she said. She went on to tell me how sex workers were drunks or women who wanted "easy" money. Yet she earned her living by selling lodgings to those women, who quite literally paid her "rent."

Something like the distinction between day and night was also reproduced by sex workers in order to reserve aspects of themselves from their work in Gaakwen. They attempted this by projecting their "real" self onto the places they came from and leaving Gaakwen as a site of work. I interviewed a woman named Miriam who spoke in two completely different registers during our conversation. Miriam had been a marathoner until an injury and a bad marriage left her searching for a job. My notes from the interview reveal my astonishment at her shift in tone:

Speech full of expressions taken from advertisements, media, mixing in English words, creating an overall sense of violent frankness. ("This is business, time is money, if you are not ready, if your transformer is not standing at attention, come another time baby, see you later, no time for massage." "This is about fucking, don't expect a *caring financial partner*" [a phrase taken from Equity Bank advertisements].)...

A shift came in the conversation when she started talking about where she was from and inviting us to visit. She said "it's so beautiful, *utapenda* [you will like it]. Fresh air, people have discipline, *heshima* [respect], girls don't even wear *longi* [trousers]. They bow when they greet someone." She transformed from an "informant" into a host - taking on the graciousness of someone you are visiting, wanting to show us beautiful instead of ugly things as before.

In part, this shift in register reflects the two people Miriam thought *I* was—at first a researcher, similar to the many journalists and health workers who had come to Gaakwen to research HIV/AIDS. Then, a potential visitor. But her choice of illustration also drew a contrast between her rural home, where people have “discipline” and Gaakwen. Miriam thus inverted the distinction between road and home. She saw her rural home as everything Gaakwen was not: a site of respect, beauty, and belonging. Her son lived with her mother at home and Miriam visited frequently; her money went toward supporting them and paying for her son’s education. In her case, what Gaakwen revealed in its duality was not so much the way that people are transformed into “new subjects” through encounters with mobility but the ways that they—especially women—existed as multiple subjects at once.

Not all women were able to preserve a separation between Gaakwen and home. Many of them no longer had a home to return to. For some, the reason for their migration to Gaakwen was one that time hadn’t healed, for others, their work had created or entrenched a sense that they couldn’t fit into the social life back there. And some were already “at home.” The story of Phyllis, a sex worker who had grown up in the Gaakwen area, disturbs the *wenyeji*’s claim that sex workers are women from “elsewhere.” If William’s story of arriving in Gaakwen demonstrated how social mores were enforced in the settlement’s early days, Phyllis’s story demonstrates the forms this boundary-making takes twenty years later. Gaakwen has in many ways grown more permissive. The clear economic importance of trades once considered repugnant has morphed into a moral ambivalence. Gaakwen society nevertheless continues to police the boundaries between the road’s more illicit life and the conventions of rural propriety. The ongoing disavowal of sex workers is one mechanism for achieving this, and it is a disavowal

that draws its motivation and logic from the risk discourses that accompanied HIV awareness campaigns.

Phyllis

Phyllis was a young woman who worked in Gaakwen but who had also grown up in a nearby village. Her father had been employed nearby, and despite the fact that he was a drinker, she went to a good secondary school in the area. But she married young and when the marriage didn't work out she returned home, the mother of two young children, in need of a way to support herself. She had hoped to receive some support from her father, but when she arrived she discovered that he actually expected her to support him. This inversion of dependencies isn't atypical, but depicts the indeterminate role of the rural home in contemporary East Africa—at once sought out as a refuge yet highly dependent on outside incomes for production and reproduction. As it was culturally inappropriate for her to share a house with her father, she could not rely on him even for housing. Finding herself alone with two children, and without the income to hire help, she couldn't fit into the inflexible schedules of the flower farms or restaurants. It was then that she remembered asking as a child what it was that people did “between the trucks at night.”

For Phyllis the closeness to home was an almost unbearable burden. A chance encounter with her church pastor—he was returning home after dark from a crusade—made her fear that she had been found out. Never accused nor accosted, she wasn't sure that her congregation would judge her for the sex work itself. But she feared that they believed that sex workers were capable of evil and would therefore ostracize her. She insisted that her father didn't know about

her work, because as a mwenyeji, he participated in Gaakwen's day-life, not its night-life. "He comes to Gaakwen...even today he was here. But he doesn't know...He even asks me sometimes 'what are you doing for work these days?' And I tell him that I get odd jobs here and there (*kibarua kibarua*)."

Phyllis aimed to leave Gaakwen as soon as she could. Her plans were extremely precise. She'd leave by the end of the year, she said—a mere four months away. She wanted a clean break before she got habituated to the rhythms of the road, and before her children were conscious of the world around them. She was confident that she could leave, and her resolve had been strengthened by her experiences of violence and close shaves with the heightened risk of life-changing disease. She'd already saved four-tenths of her one thousand dollar target. Her "survival plan," as she called it, was to start a boutique selling urban fashion at affordable prices to rural women. She would start a new life in Kericho County, where her grandmother lived. There, declaring a Christian salvation through Jesus, she would make a clean break with the past, and force herself to fit into rural life. To leave too late, she feared, was to risk getting found out and forever ruining her prospects of a social life away from Gaakwen. Recounting the hazards of her work, she spoke of emergency visits to clinics for post-exposure prophylaxis, close encounters with death, and of girls she'd known who were murdered by violent clients. She knew another woman who had been imprisoned for killing in self-defense, and still others condemned to a life on antiretrovirals. But to leave too soon was to have suffered without profit. She said that her work on the road was "the construction of a new foundation." But she feared she might not be able to get out before the violence or illness of her work caught up with her.

Using the word “risk” in English, she said, “*tuna-risk maisha yetu juu ya pesa,*” we risk our lives for money.¹⁴³

Phyllis’s sharp sense of the risks of her work contrasted with—even as it was partially derived from—the ideas of social workers who came to Gaakwen to “sensitize” sex workers about HIV (as though they were not already acutely sensitive to it). Here, however, I want to think about this risk from another perspective—in relation to the way that wenyaji sought to disavow sex workers’ contribution to their own accumulation. Thinking about this from the perspective of risk, and the role of sex workers in attracting truckers, this disavowal comes to seem more like a kind of outsourcing. The sex workers carried road risk on behalf of the landlords.

Outsourcing hospitality

I have mentioned that Gaakwen wenyaji saw themselves as providing a kind of hospitality to the various outsiders who both lived in and passed through Gaakwen. One way of talking about Gaakwen’s hospitality enacted a subtle ethnic claim to the Rift Valley, by presenting the Kipsigis as “hosting” people of other ethnicities. As a member of the Gaakwen Business Community said in a public meeting, “the Luo came here and mixed, so did the Gikuyu, other Kalenjins, so we ended up hosting all ethnic groups.” But hospitality was also meant in a more classic sense: Gaakwen offered food, rest, and entertainment to passing travelers. That these were offered for a price didn’t prevent Gaakwen residents from thinking of it as hospitality.

¹⁴³ “Life,” in this sense, does not mean physical life. State programs that give out antiretrovirals for free have turned what was once a death sentence into a manageable condition. But Phyllis said that to face a life on ARVs felt like a trap that made many women “lose hope.”

In describing police harassment of sex workers, the town's leadership complained that police were "interfering with Gaakwen's hospitality." This comment struck me, particularly in relation to the disavowal of sex workers by wenyaji. How could sex workers—who, according to wenyaji, were both outsiders and commercial traders—be at the heart of Gaakwen's hospitality?

In Luise White's (1990) account of prostitution in colonial Nairobi she describes an unexpected correlation between hospitality and accumulation. White distinguishes different kinds of sex work according to how and where the work took place. The women who solicited on the street, "watembezi prostitutes," were described as aggressive and commercially oriented. Those called "malaya," who had access to rooms and used this space to offer the "comforts of home" like laundry, cooked food, and conversation, were perceived as less commercial. But White argues that the "malaya" prostitutes, who invested in real estate and were thus able to provide an experience of domesticity, were in fact the more resolutely urban and individualist—they held themselves apart from their rural origins and the claims of kin. The fact that their work mimicked domestic life and rejected explicit commercialization disguised their attachment to accumulation in the form of property. In contrast, "watembezi," mobile prostitutes, sent money home to rural areas and thus contributed to the accumulation of fathers and brothers.

White's work is interesting with respect to Gaakwen because its interlinked objects—sex work as domestic labor, real estate, and the relationship between urban labor forms and rural modes of production—are also linked in Gaakwen, but in a different configuration. In Gaakwen, as I've noted, many residents acknowledge that sex work underwrites the growth of the settlement, and thus supports the accumulation of residents. While some sex workers have

successfully invested in real estate in Gaakwen and elsewhere—I heard of at least three, including one whose bar is prominently located on the roadside strip—their labor more obviously contributes to *others'* accumulation.

I describe this as “outsourcing hospitality” because Gaakwen’s sex workers carried and absorbed much of the risk of associating with outsiders and strangers. Many sex workers understood themselves as entrepreneurs, taking on a risk because sex work offered greater possibilities for income than other available work. One sex worker quoted in a newspaper article about Gaakwen spells it out, in language that could have come from an entrepreneurialism textbook:

“I discovered that there was more money in sex work than at the bar,” says Achieng’ adding, “After all, sex work is self-employment just like business unlike in the bar where I was employed.” (Kibui 2014)

While Achieng’ presents sex work as a legitimate business—indeed, the more legitimate for being entrepreneurial—the risks of the work in a Kenya marked by HIV/AIDS were more than economic. As entrepreneurs, their body was their capital, and thus what they stood to lose was their wellbeing and their lives. Far more than in White’s Nairobi, the women in Gaakwen’s sex trade encountered their own work through the lens of a compounded risk—they were “risky subjects,” those who are constituted as subjects by their own riskiness (Patel 2006). One effect of anti-HIV/AIDS campaigns’ focus on “at risk populations” was that sex workers had become increasingly criminalized and stigmatized. Thus, even as Kenya’s anti-prostitution laws are not especially harsh, the cumulative effect of evangelical moralizing and NGO work was to make

sex workers far more vulnerable to police and to public opinion. As Phyllis had it, they were considered guilty even for defending themselves against murderous clients.

More, the risk discourse also produced them as critics of their work. Sex workers like Phyllis understood their work as entrenching their sense of alienation from family and society, and from the norms that defined their communities. And they were the only one of Gaakwen's trades not to organize in a guild.¹⁴⁴ Their approach to risk, aligning with that of *wenyeji*, made them available for what I am calling "outsourcing." Gaakwen *wenyeji* relied on them to provide hospitality, while excluding them from membership and protection in the community.

Let me turn now to one final scene in which Gaakwen defined itself, its hospitality, and its future. Here, the politics of development met the politics of ethnicity to produce a claim on infrastructure as both the recognition of Gaakwen's ethnic identity, and its cosmopolitan hospitality. It also elaborated a social anxiety about the town's future, and the sense that its vision of the future was in danger.

VI. HARAMBEE

We brought our cow from Nairobi when the legs were fat. It reached Nakuru and became thin. On reaching Gaakwen there is nothing. When we try to save it, they want to jail us, now what will we do?

These words were said in a fundraiser that took place in Gaakwen in August 2016. The "cow" in question was development money for Gaakwen, which—the analogy went—had been earmarked

¹⁴⁴ Recall that in discussing primitive accumulation, Marx writes that "to become a free seller of labour power, who carries his commodity wherever he finds a market, [the laborer] must further have escaped from the regime of the guilds."

for Gaakwen by the central government (“Nairobi”) but appropriated by the county government (“Nakuru”), which did not spend it on improving the truck stop. Protesting the disappearance of this money, Gaakwen landlords had held a demonstration, blocking the highway with burning tires, and in the course of the event a county firetruck got burned. Four organizers, William and Battalion among them, had been arrested for having set fire to this truck, and were facing the threat of jail alongside huge fines and lawyer fees. The fundraising event (*harambee*) was organized to help pay for these costs and to get the state to take notice.

The backstory to this event was the perceived discrimination against Gaakwen, understood as ethnic bias against a Kipsigis town in a country governed under a Gikuyu governor. This perception centered around infrastructure. Gaakwen had successfully petitioned the government for a parking space and World Bank funding for the project had been obtained, but just as it seemed that all was going well, a compensation case for the plots of land to be taken over by the parking bay held up the construction. Frustrated, the government claimed that Gaakwen had “refused development.” Then a much smaller project was initiated in 2015. The ground was leveled, but the project stalled and remained incomplete for a year. The partially dug-up ground was more difficult than ever for truckers to use, especially given the tricky navigation necessary when the space was dark and tightly packed. Like police swoops on sex workers that led to diminished traffic, the stalled project had undermined Gaakwen’s capacity to host trucks. Drawing on stories of tricksters, who appeared friendly and helpful but gave wrong direction, William said that the government was acting like the tricksters of Kipsigis folklore. “Wanajifanya wanatibu, kumbe wanaua,” he said—they pretend to heal, but in fact they kill.

At the rally, speaker after speaker noted the failure of the government to “answer their cries.” Noting with pride that Gaakwen’s growth was self-sponsored, speakers lamented the county government’s exploitation of this wealth in taxes and levies, and its failure to return an investment in the town. It was said repeatedly, that of all the county’s townships (i.e. besides its major towns, Nakuru and Naivasha) Gaakwen was the “number one source of revenue for Nakuru County.” In spite of that fact, the county government privileged other towns in its revenue allocation. This was described as a betrayal of Gaakwen’s electoral commitment in the previous election, where the township had voted for the now ruling coalition. Amidst rumors that the purpose of a new highway under construction was to draw traffic away from Gaakwen, speakers expressed a genuine sense of uncertainty around the future of the settlement. One expressed this betrayal in ethnic terms, suggesting that their shared kinship with the Deputy President, who identified as an ethnic Kalenjin and was said to be Kipsigis, was being ignored. As this speaker said, addressing the absent Deputy President, “You do not see your brother’s face soiled with porridge, and fail to wipe it off.”

The event constructed Gaakwen and its future as a Kipsigis concern. It was hosted by the Gaakwen Business Community. The dominant language was Kipsigis.¹⁴⁵ The guest of honor was Governor Isaac Rutto, who had presented himself the “true leader” of Kipsigis. Creating a schism in the Kalenjin ethnic coalition, Rutto supported the charge that the section had been let down by the Deputy President.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵ I am grateful to Cynthia Chepkemoi for her assistance in translating from Kipsigis and for discussions on the submerged meaning of various sayings.

¹⁴⁶ His gripe was more than ethnic. Rutto was also the champion of a movement called “Pesa Mashinani”—“money to the grassroots”—that aimed to shift budgetary allocations and spending control toward the local level. This he said, would allow more responsive spending and grant a necessary degree of autonomy to the grassroots for the peculiar needs of marginal counties.

The public performances traced a cartography of Kipsigis losses in the Rift Valley and drew on Kipsigis socio-economic idiom. Cryptic riddles, proverbs and metaphor constructed around appropriately milky tea, honey in trees, cattle dips, and rural weddings situated Gaakwen in a very ethnically-specific rurality. But speakers also spoke of Gaakwen as a town. Even as the language of the meeting excluded non-Kipsigis listeners, the speakers spoke of Gaakwen's hospitality, its ethnic cosmopolitanism, and its "twenty-four hour economy." And it was infrastructure that most clearly represented their marginalization. Noting that Gaakwen had business through the night, a speaker asked why security lights had recently been installed in Rongai town, where they were just "lighting up the forest," and not in Gaakwen. Another ridiculed the poorly constructed parking lot as "300,000 shillings (\$3000) worth of soil for planting bananas."

The event coalesced the way in which the road offered a non-agrarian future that was nonetheless *Kipsigis*. The members of the Gaakwen Business Community were involved in this event both as community leaders and as landlords protecting the value of their investment in real estate. The valuation of their property inhered in its relationship with the road. Poor parking facilities threatened the stopovers that allowed the road's wealth to leak out into Gaakwen. "Sabotage by development" threatened to turn investment in plots and buildings back into farmland. The calculative horizons of sex workers, landlords, waitresses and even shoe-shiners were also implicated in the outcome of this struggle. To lose was to move backwards. Remembering histories of Kipsigis dispossession and marginalization, the Chairman of the Gaakwen Business Community rewrote their speculative investment as a Kipsigis claim to urban space. Noting that all of the other urban centers in Nakuru County were dominated by their rival

ethnic group, he exclaimed: “We do not have any other town. If Gaakwen goes, then I don’t know where Kalenjin people will go. Nakuru has been sold. Where will we go when it is taken from us?”

Before moving on, I should recall the threads of this chapter and section. From different sites, the two chapters in this section have examined the relationship between land-based and road-based forms of accumulation. In Shimalabandu, motorcycle riders straddled mobile work and agrarian lives; in Gaakwen, once-agricultural land became roadside real estate. As part of this process, those working and living along the road learned to engage new futurities and new calculative dispositions—in relation to forms of measurement, tempos, technologies, and symbols. While land resettlement programs and the agrarian reform of the late colonial and post-independence periods had already encouraged shifts in property to individual tenure and enmeshed rural populations in cycles of credit and risk, these shifts were nonetheless steps toward greater separation of producers from land. At the same time, they were partial and uneven. Roadside populations remained attached to land and kin/neighbor-based socialities and ethnically-embedded forms of production and reproduction, even as they took also steps away from them.

Two aspects of the history of Gaakwen’s growth seem particularly significant to me. The first is the way that it preserved the structure of elder-control even while profoundly changing the mores that elders were charged with preserving. Gaakwen’s “customs” were not at all the conservative customs of surrounding rural areas. The contingent and transitory nature of road wealth encouraged an orientation toward flexible minds and flexible accumulation, and the

guardians of social continuity were also deeply invested in this. Thus it is not possible to draw any simple opposition between “capitalist” and “social” attachments. The second, related, aspect is the naturalization of growing inequality. The fact that Gaakwen was a rural periphery didn’t prevent its residents from aspiring to accumulation. Unlike in previous moments, where Kipsigis mobilized social justice claims against a market in land, in Gaakwen they were fully committed to real estate.

Still, changes in Gaakwen produced an awareness of contingency—a recognition that *things could be otherwise*. In the next section, I explore how this recognition was converted into action “against” dominant orders. Road accidents and their aftermaths offered possibilities to reimagine what those orders were.

PART II: ACCIDENT

CRASHES

A man tells me there have been two accident deaths in his family, his mother and his brother. When his mother was hit, his uncle talked to the car owner and settled with him. The man didn't hear anything else about it. But when his brother died, someone came to the village saying that a Nissan he owned had hit and killed someone in the area and he wanted to find the family. The man says that after he heard this he went to the mortuary, because his brother had been missing for three days. He found him there. He got in contact with the Nissan owner through the police. The owner gave him 6,000 shillings (\$60) for the burial and arranged to transport the body from the mortuary to their land for burial. The man told me that of the two cases it is the first that weighs on his mind. He thinks his uncle didn't act properly. The issue was never closed for him because he never got a "report." With his brother, he felt everyone had behaved as they should. He was satisfied with the outcome.

*

A man was in a bus that crashed on the way to Nairobi. He worked as a potter and was transporting some pots to complete an order for a shopping center. He had almost decided not to travel, because a man near the bus was acting strange and he suspected a witch, but he went anyway. His pots were destroyed and his money was stolen while he was unconscious. He recovered but his injuries made it difficult to work the way he used to. An insurance claim on behalf of the passengers was filed by a Nairobi lawyer. For a while he would be called to Nairobi to fill out papers, spending money to travel back and forth, but nothing ever came of it. That was over ten years ago. He thinks the lawyer took his money. When I asked him what amount he thought would be sufficient, he said, "I lost a lot of blood. Blood is money. 200,000 shillings (\$2,000) would satisfy me."

*

An elderly woman's elderly husband was hit by a Nissan minivan while riding his bike to a neighbor's funeral. After four days in the local hospital he was transferred to the larger hospital in Nairobi but he died on the way. They returned him to the local mortuary. The woman tells me she felt she was too old to bother with a case but her husband's brothers insisted on getting a lawyer. They got a payout but she doesn't know how much it was—she only got a little bit she says, 80,000 shillings (\$800). Although she hadn't wanted to pursue the claim, this money did not compensate her for her husband's loss.

*

A husband was riding his younger brother's motorcycle on his way to see his cousin. A Nissan stopped abruptly in front of him and he crashed into it. He was taken to the hospital and died

there the same day. When he didn't come home, the family started looking for him. Finally his brother went to the police station to see if he'd been arrested and saw his own motorcycle in the police yard, that's how they found out. The man had nothing on him to identify him when he was hit. He'd left his ID at home, and his phone was somewhere getting charged. He disappeared on Saturday, and was found, in the mortuary, on Monday. The man's wife tells me she wanted to start a "case" but had no one to help her do it. When she asked her husband's brother, he said he was too busy to help and told her she needed to find witnesses. Finally she decided to let it go. She expresses no interest in punishing the driver: what a "case" means to her is the possibility of compensation. She is worried about paying her children's school fees. But she says the big problem is that her husband's brother wants to use the land she lives on to build a bar, even though her husband had already put it in her sons' names before he died. The brothers are pressuring her to leave—they haven't been violent yet but they might be planning something, she says.

*

A man was hit by a car and spent a month in the hospital. When he went to the police to report the accident, they recommended he get a lawyer and offered to find him one. He wasn't sure he could afford to pay the initial fee so he told them he'd think about it and went home. The next day a young man came to his farm and told him he worked with a lawyer who would help him. He tells me this young man had gotten his information from the police. He agreed to go see the lawyer but nothing ever came of it. He says he'd thought maybe God had planned the accident so that someone would come help him, but it didn't turn out that way.

*

In 2003, a mother sent her five-year-old daughter on an errand to the roadside shop. The girl was hit as she was waiting to cross. She was hit by a Nissan, license plate number KAN 127J. The vehicle that hit her took her to the hospital. The driver said he didn't see her, he just saw something like a ball. The father later says he had to say that—a driver can't admit that he hit someone and saw it. The girl was hit at 1pm and died at 2am. The father went to a lawyer who wanted 15,000 shillings (\$150), to begin a "case." He called this "prosecuting the grave." The father didn't have the money so he went to another lawyer, one who agreed to a commission. This lawyer took all his documentation: burial permit, police abstract, everything. They were called to court once, to court number five. The father heard the child's name called out and knew the case had been registered. He continued to visit the lawyer's office to check on the case. But he didn't hear anything. Ten years later, nothing has happened. All the paperwork is still with the lawyer. The father speaks with more sympathy toward the driver than toward this lawyer—the driver took the child to the hospital and reported the accident to the police. But the lawyer's harm is intentional. The father says, "I've understood I'm just here to be eaten."

*

These are some of the accident stories I collected in western Kenya. Looking at them assembled, I find it remarkable how unsettled almost all of these cases seem to be. The search for compensation seems in many of these examples to extend and expand the loss rather than to provide resolution. Institutions and forms repeat: lawyers, traffic police, the mortuary, documentation. The accident and search for compensation pulled rural residents into a world of bureaucracy that seemed designed to extract from them. These stories reveal that the injurious event is only the beginning of a process. The loss is not contained by bureaucracy but rather expanded and amplified by it.

More than that, many of the stories suggest deep fractures *within* households. An elderly woman is persuaded to agree to a case by her in-laws, which ultimately leaves her unsatisfied. A young woman whose husband died is being pushed off her land, despite having sons who give her claim to it. A man is displeased at how his mother's brother handled a case. The striations of kinship that appear in so many anthropological texts also appear here, but so do new violations: existing fractures are exacerbated by the bureaucratic and predatory forms through which the accident is processed. What experiences are produced here, where sudden death meets the struggles of kinship within spaces that are adversely incorporated into bureaucratic regimes? Is there space for a concept of "accident" within such configurations?

DEATH AND THE BOMA

Chapter Five

Perhaps the dead can be reduced to fixed forms, though their surviving records are against it.

—Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*

I. RUMORS

Just before I returned to Shimalabandu for a second extended stay, a road accident happened nearby. It was a big one—a pickup truck functioning as a hearse had collided with a large passenger bus—and it was the talk of the town when I arrived. On a stretch of road known for frequent crashes, this one attained notoriety both because of the number of people injured and one spectacular detail: in the accident, the corpse being transported, that of a young woman, had flown out of its coffin. Commenting on the woman's beauty and her disfigurement following the crash, a friend said that "it was as if she had died again."

I first heard about the accident because someone related to my host family had died in it. My host Veronica began talking about it as soon as we settled into her sitting room for a catch-up chat. The relative who had died was her mother-in-law's daughter from a previous marriage. This daughter had been a member of the mourning party, and was in the pickup that was carrying the coffin.¹⁴⁷ When telling me the story, Veronica asked that I not let on to her mother-in-law (*Gogo*, grandmother) that she had told. Veronica lived on a *boma* (household compound) together with her husband's parents, and relations among them were tense. She thought *Gogo* might not want

¹⁴⁷ She was in the mourning party because she was related by marriage to the deceased.

me to know about this “other” daughter, and would certainly not want me to have heard it from Veronica. And in fact, though other people in the village mentioned the accident, including Veronica’s father-in-law, Mzee Roberto, Gogo never said a word about it.

Over the next few weeks I heard different versions of the accident story, in the village, in the national media, in Kakamega town, and near the accident spot itself. The accident had become a political spectacle at both the regional and the national scale: the high number of deaths and injuries combined with national attention to road safety made it a prime opportunity for political performance. The bodies were displayed at the local stadium and the viewing was presided over and paid for by the county governor and senator; the president also sent a contribution. At the same time, it became the object of local gossip, which speculated over the “real” cause of the accident. This gossip fixated on the young woman at the center of the accident, the beautiful corpse who had “died again.” The stories claimed that a burial dispute among kin over the body was the source of the accident because the funeral procession was being conducted in haste. A related rumor argued that the corpse *itself* had caused the accident, because it didn’t want to be buried where it was being taken: the husband’s home. In the course of discussing the event, different theories were proposed for why there might have been a burial dispute, ranging from unpaid bridewealth to problems in the couple’s relationship. These conversations revealed a present anxiety around shifting land and family arrangements.

In western Kenya, questions of appropriate household relationships, the “place” of women, and the relations between the living and the dead are more than just gossip. During my fieldwork in Kakamega, households were under intense pressure. Contentious relationships among parents and children, between husbands and wives, and among siblings responded to and

exacerbated pressures related to changes in land use, the decline of agricultural incomes, and changing household formations. Disputes around burial sites, like the one said to have caused the accident, were one manifestation of these tensions. These disputes (and their appearance within rumors) reflected the ongoing importance of burial sites and their imbrication in kinship and land-based relations, particularly in the former reserves. But they also reflected tensions more specific to this moment, questions around social worlds made uncertain by both new forms of death and a decreasing ability to anchor social reproduction through land, inheritance, and marriage.

This chapter tracks several accidents that took place at or near Shimalabandu and the disputes that attended them. It seeks to unpack how the injurious event became a space through which people adjudicated social propriety and belonging. Discussion and dispute around these accidents was concerned not only with the immediate questions of how the accident happened and who was responsible for it, but also with more oblique questions around the social ties that located those who died in networks of family and community, and which anchored them in space. The rumors that emerged to explain the deaths, and the associated disputes around their burials, didn't explain the deaths in terms of bad road conditions or reckless driver behavior (though these are common explanations for accidents in Kenya as around the world), but in terms of ruptures in the social fabric occasioned by people who did not properly care for their kin. Here, rumor was more than "just gossip." It was through the circulation of rumor that the injurious event became a site of debate around changing social mores.

Anthropologists have long been interested in responses to unexpected misfortune as a site for elucidating modes of reasoning (Evans-Pritchard 1976; Lévi-Strauss 1966; Siegel 2005). As

they have pointed out, the modern meaning of “accident”—as agentless effect of technology, and as singular event—is only one of the frameworks through which unanticipated misfortune can be explained. Witchcraft, sorcery, fate, or other forms of effectivity and causation can also be invoked to answer the question posed by misfortune: “Why?” This is precisely the question that Evans-Pritchard says is answered by witchcraft among the Azande: “Witchcraft explains *why* events are harmful to man and not *how* they happen”; it “gives to social events their moral value” (Evans-Pritchard 1976:25–27). In his analysis of witchcraft, James Siegel probes how it is, exactly, that witchcraft serves this role. He shows that the work of constructing causation in the face of negativity (“naming the witch”) also constructs certain kinds of, destructive, collectivities. Witchcraft should not be understood as an “explanation,” he writes, but rather as an “attempt to bring into signification that which is unsignifiable” (2005:23), to generalize the irreducibly singular. That is, discussions of causation are in fact not about cause and effect but rather about the confrontation with the unknown that is provoked by death; they reveal the attempts of the social to deal with a negativity that is not socially comprehensible.

I draw on this analysis as I consider some of the possibilities that are opened up by events which, in their violence and unexpectedness, provoke the question “Why?” These possibilities ranged, in the stories I will recount, from a recalibrating of household relationships in one small *boma* (household compound) to village and county-level discussions around the proper “place” of women. While the bulk of this dissertation is concerned with what happens *on* the road, here I consider what happens when the road’s “eventfulness” (Morris 2008) makes its mark on the

boma in the form of accidental death.¹⁴⁸ I examine the “social experience of sudden death” (Luckin and Cooter 1997) in relation to the frames that both sought to make sense of it, and were altered by it.

II. BOMA

In Kakamega, the term “boma politics” (*siasa ya boma*) described the tensions that almost inevitably arose when members of an extended family lived together in the household compound known as the *boma*. Urban migrants often spoke with relief of having escaped these quarrels of confinement; eruptions that emerged from tensions over the distribution of resources and affection. During my stay in Shimalabandu I heard story after story, often distressing in their violence, about quarrels within bomas and with immediate neighbors.

The boma I stayed in was no exception. It was very near the highway, and was undergoing a transformation in land use due to this proximity; several of the conflicts were related to the shift away from agricultural uses and toward real estate. The compound was occupied by an extended family overseen by a grandfather-patriarch, Mzee Roberto. I initially met Mzee Roberto while conducting research on road accidents around Shimalabandu, because his son Xander had died in an accident a few years before. When I decided to stay in Shimalabandu proper, I asked him whether I might stay in one of the rental rooms (*landis*) he’d built next to his house. Feeling that his non-electrified mud rooms were not suitable for me, he

¹⁴⁸ Disability is another effect of road accidents that has serious consequences for boma life. Julie Livingston’s *Debility and the Moral Imagination* (Livingston 2005) is an excellent account of a context that resembles western Kenya. Here, however, I limit myself to discussing accidental death because of my focus on the relationship between death, land, and belonging.

sent me to stay with his daughter-in-law Veronica instead. She was the wife of Roberto's eldest son, Jumuia, who lived and worked in Mombasa. Despite living in the same boma, her house's door perhaps one hundred feet from his, Veronica had electricity where the patriarch didn't.¹⁴⁹ This was one sign among many others of the mistrust that characterized the boma.

Veronica's conflicted relationship with her in-laws was only one of the tense relationships that permeated the compound. Indeed, each of the four households living in this compound—the patriarch's household, as well as the families of each of his three sons—featured a vivid story of abandonment, divorce, or death.¹⁵⁰ Veronica's tensions with the family came to a head around a road accident and its aftermath, which I will recount here at some length, before introducing some more general thoughts about accident, death, and social life.

Mzee Roberto's second-born son Xander had been a bicycle boda boda rider. In 2007, he was hit by a speeding tour vehicle near Shimalabandu. The vehicle, a Land Cruiser, was ferrying tourists from Eldoret town to the Kakamega Forest Reserve. There were many gory recountings of the aftermath of this crash. As Mzee Roberto described it, the top of the boy's head was taken

¹⁴⁹ Jumuia and Veronica's son had built himself a house in her part of the compound but lived in Mombasa; I stayed in this house. It was built using money from a successful sugarcane rental (under Veronica's management). With its tyrolian render and electricity, the house stood as a highly visible symbol of his success. The son wasn't married and rarely visited, so the house largely remained empty.

¹⁵⁰ Mzee Roberto had given his three sons their inheritance early, handing over their land with title deeds. Thus three stamp-sized compounds sat side by side, separated by short hedges. Each had a small house, with a kitchen garden behind and a small yard in front. In front of these was the *mzee's* compound—he had kept title to his own piece of the land, to avoid having to rely on his sons in his old age. (The tradition was that the youngest son inherits the father's land, but Mzee Roberto said if he did that, the son could kick him out when he was old.) On his land he had built *landis*—rows of single room houses which he rented out. He was one of the first to do this in Shimalabandu, but the practice was spreading as the growth of nearby Kakamega town made rental houses an attractive investment. When I first lived in the compound, Mzee Roberto and Gogo were the only couple who had stayed together. Veronica's husband, Jumuia, rarely visited (his last visit had been two years before). In the next compound was Vinny, the last-born son and his two sons. His wife had left him, taking their daughter, in part because she had become a follower of the Prophet Owuor and in part because of his drinking. In the farthest compound was Mary, whose husband Xander was Mzee Roberto's second-born. When Xander died, he left her with three girls. She subsequently had another child with an occasional boyfriend. This could have been reason to evict her but Mzee Roberto had decided not to.

off, leaving his brain exposed. Xander was taken to the county hospital in Kakamega, then to the national referral hospital in Eldoret. His passenger (a neighbor, also from Shimalabandu) survived with a badly fractured leg, but Xander died ten days later. As is common in cases of unexpected misfortune, and even though all the care Xander received was given at public hospitals, Mzee Roberto had to sell a piece of land to cover the hospital bills so that the hospital would release the body for burial.¹⁵¹

A ritual called a *shinini* was employed to bring Xander's spirit home and to ensure it didn't remain on the road to trouble others. The day after the burial, family and friends went to the place where he was hit, bringing branches to leave on the road. Mzee Roberto said that they sang, prayed, and spoke to the spirit, saying:

Hiyo ajali ikome saa hii ikomee kwa wewe. Kama wewe mwenyewe ulianguka kwa gari hiyo wewe uende tu salama.

This accident should stop here. It should stop with you. Since you were the one who died in the crash, you go, go safely.

Then they walked back to the deceased's home, taking care not to look behind them so that the spirit would follow. Unclaimed spirits are said to cause accidents, because, as people say, the spirit doesn't want to go alone.¹⁵²

I heard little of the funeral, though I was told that the widow's father demanded Mzee Roberto finish paying bridewealth, else he would not let his daughter attend the deceased's funeral (which would have been a radical disruption of social order). Mzee Roberto complied,

¹⁵¹ Detentions of already discharged patients, and of already dead patients, turn hospitals into jails for those who cannot afford to pay. Often, funeral collections go toward paying the last installments on accumulating payments owed to state hospitals and morgues.

¹⁵² Deaths on the road are particularly dangerous in terms of spirits, because the road carries people who are coming from and going to other places. When these passing travelers meet an accident, often no one comes to escort their spirits home.

fearing a curse if he didn't, though they were able to agree on a reduced settlement. Xander's wife and three daughters continued to live on the stamp of land allocated as Xander's inheritance by the old man. Although women's claim to stay on their husband's land can be tenuous when they have no sons, since women are denied inheritance rights, Mzee Roberto even claimed that he would ensure the three girls inherited the land.¹⁵³

In contrast with a time in which the accident would have required further rituals to contain the harm, the *shinini* was the only form of cleansing that took place, and Mzee Roberto believed it had been successful. He also didn't feel the need to seek compensation directly from the driver of the offending vehicle, though this remains common; instead Mzee Roberto pursued an insurance case and eventually received some compensation (more on this below). But despite the seeming success of procedures that very often fail—both *shinini* and compensation cases are subject to infelicities—the accident nevertheless played into existing fractures within the boma.

Mzee Roberto's eldest son, Jumuaia, had been in a feud with his father for some time, because of the sale of that small piece of land which, it turns out, Mzee Roberto had wanted to sell even before the accident. Jumuaia had accused the mzee of wanting to sell a part of his inheritance. Now, Jumuaia was a complicated son. Gogo was not his mother. His mother and Mzee Roberto had been together only for a short time, and when she left she took Jumuaia, a small child, with her. So he had grown up with his mother's relatives. It wasn't until the age of thirty that Jumuaia returned to "his place."¹⁵⁴ As an adult, then, he returned to claim his right to be given land by his father. Even after getting his piece, a quarter-acre sized rectangle carved out of

¹⁵³ Despite this relatively generous aspiration, he also said that if Xander had had a son, the son would have inherited alone.

¹⁵⁴ *Kwake, kwao*, literally "his place" or "their place" are used to describe the place of one's lineage.

his father's 1.25 acres, and building a house, he never really lived on the boma. But his wife did —after a few years with Jumuia in Mombasa, Veronica settled on her husband's allocated land. The relationship between Veronica and the household was always fraught: because Jumuia had not grown up there and because he was not the reigning grandmother's child, Veronica always felt excluded. She said Gogo would invite the other grandchildren to eat at her house, but exclude Veronica's children, a denial of commensality all the more vicious because visited upon her children rather than herself. The feud between Jumuia and his father made things worse, at times forcing a pastor to intervene to settle the war between her and her in-laws. Nevertheless, she managed to build relationships in the community, and to establish several small businesses—first, brewing alcohol but later selling vegetables from her house or on the roadside next to her house, planting maize and sugarcane, getting electricity and then charging phones for a small fee. Perhaps her drive for progress and evident ability at it sewed jealousy in the family.¹⁵⁵

After Xander's death, Veronica was accused of having conspired with Mzee Roberto's brother (who lived the adjacent compound) to kill him with witchcraft. She was able to defend herself against the witchcraft accusation and in the end it didn't go anywhere—she remained on the boma—but this series of events cemented her resentment and suspicion of her marital family. She recounted with bitterness the way that, when the first insurance money came, other members of the family were given money and cuts of meat to celebrate, while she and her children received a small amount of money and then nothing. She emphasized that when the time came to eat together, she was not invited.

¹⁵⁵ The house we stayed in was an indication of Veronica's relative prosperity in comparison to that of the other families in the boma or even in the village, as was the fact that she never personally went to gather firewood nor sent her daughter.

This witchcraft accusation was not a serious one, in the sense that it did not seem to be a genuine effort to expel Veronica or cause her any harm. Most discussion of witchcraft I heard in Shimalabandu, and Kakamega more generally, was of this kind—more of the tenor of gossip than accusation.¹⁵⁶ Nevertheless, it made the already bad household relations even worse. Veronica stopped collaborating with her in-laws in any way. Though she remained friendly with other members of the boma, including with two of Mzee Roberto’s daughters who had both left their marriages and were living in his rental rooms with their children, her relations with the grandparents were stiff.

Here, the crash and subsequent accusation instantiated the way that contingent events, as Jean Comaroff puts it, “flow into the cracks of existing structure” (1985:165)—and, in this case, deepen those cracks. The crash recalibrated social relations, but according to patterns already established. I use this conjunctural frame to think more generally about how the abrupt increase in accidental deaths that accompanied expanded automobility intersected with existing continuities and fractures within the household. In particular, I consider the way it intersected with existing anxieties about household reproduction and the place of women, in the context of the collapse of the rural and its associations with tradition and ethnic reproduction.

¹⁵⁶ *Uchawi* or *ushirikina* are the Kiswahili words usually translated as witchcraft; *kurogwa* also means to be bewitched. While I heard stories of witch hunters in Kakamega in the 1990s, and continued to hear about them in other parts of western Kenya, while I was in Kakamega I never heard of a witchcraft accusation that went far enough to result in a trial or an attack. Nonetheless, many forms of magical actors and of magical action were present. These included *waganga*, often known as “traditional herbalists,” who could be both benevolent and malevolent. There were several “indigenous illnesses,” such as “*muyekha*,” which could not be cured by doctors but only by *waganga*. People talked frequently about the action of “*kusukumiwa*,” literally “to be pushed,” which means to have been acted upon by some (malevolent and nonspecific) magical force. This was a term I only heard in Kakamega, and often this was used interchangeably with ideas of witchcraft.

Risaf

Xander's death played into existing household tensions in such a way that an accusation was made. This accusation didn't substantially transform the household; what did, as I will discuss below, was the compensation received from the insurance company covering the driver's car. Nevertheless, the event exacerbated tensions in ways that are relevant to the wider focus of this dissertation on the transformation of rural space. And it revealed how this transformation plays out through and against the domestic sphere. The domestic or intimate is traditionally characterized as a site of mutuality and affection; the boma is said to cushion its members against the risks and harms of wage labor or industrial modernity, even if it also produces conflict (Ferguson 2015; Meillassoux 1981). But here the boma—beset by existing tensions—amplified and extended these harms.

In formerly colonized spaces, particularly settler colonies, the rural has been described as the site of reproduction of people and traditions. As Hylton White writes of South Africa—drawing on Marx's distinction between “work” and “life”—the rural is constructed as the site of “real life,” cultural life, where the urban is the site of work (White 2010).¹⁵⁷ White draws out nicely a contradiction that resonates with western Kenya: the valorization of the rural as a site of social, cultural, and alimentary reproduction sits alongside the “collapse of rural life” (2010:502). In Kenya, as in South Africa, this collapse is both longstanding and ongoing. The settlement policies that forced “African” populations to make their homes in overcrowded

¹⁵⁷ As White writes, the distinction between work and home is a marker of capitalist society. This distinction is constructed spatially and temporally, and produces “life” and “home” as a private space of self-making outside of work. In this frame, “home” and “culture” operate quite similarly. White writes, “Quite strikingly, the practices Marx identifies with the sphere of private liveliness are also ones that provide the modern culture concept with much of its material content” (2010: 509).

reserves both enforced an association of ethnicity with rural areas and encouraged out-migration. More recently, the withdrawal of rural development initiatives has exacerbated trends of declining productivity and decreased access to health and education. Yet the what Rebekah Lee calls “moral authority of the rural” (Lee 2011) has only become stronger.¹⁵⁸ This contradiction is intensified by the fact that rural households continue to be perceived as sites of mutuality and redistribution (Neves and du Toit 2013).

Many urban Kenyans still speak of “going to the reserve”—*kuenda risaf*¹⁵⁹—when they traveling describe traveling “home” to a rural area. *Kuenda risaf* means that one is going to the village one is said to be “from.”¹⁶⁰ Calling a rural space “risaf” grants it a particular meaning. Derived from the more specific “reserve”—the spaces created as ethnic homelands for groups expelled to make room for the White Highlands—the idea of “risaf” reflects that expulsion policy's particular ethno-spatial imagination. Risaf is understood as a space of ethnic solidarity and as a place where traditions are preserved. It is thus defined both against the urban and against other kinds of rural, the rural of wealthy landowners, displaced squatters, and land that is bought rather than inherited. It also carries connotations of delayed modernity or exclusion from modernity.

¹⁵⁸ In Kenya, the relationship of rural space with both ethnic solidarity and custom reproduces in many ways colonial ideas about the reserves as sites of custom and solidarity. However, the spatialization of ethnicity seems renewed in recent years. As I discussed in Chapter Three with respect to the Rift Valley, ethno-political violence that came to a head throughout the 1990s has led to the ethnic homogenization of certain spaces. Many rural areas are now less ethnically mixed than they were in the 1980s.

¹⁵⁹ It took me some time to realize that the word I heard as “risaf” was “reserve.” Though I have never seen it written, I have transliterated it here as “risaf” to mark the distinction between the meaning of the term as used in everyday speech and the more specific historical meaning of “reserve.”

¹⁶⁰ Among younger people, other terms include “ocago,” or “shags.” These are versions of “gecagi,” a Gikuyu word meaning “farm,” which has entered Swahili as slang. While both risaf and shags carry particular meanings, in practice one might use them when visiting any kind of ‘rural’ space where one has family, even if that place is not associated with one’s ‘ancestral’ land.

The sense of being “behind” may feed into the moral authority of risaf space by helping to further construct it as “customary,” but it also reveals the intense pressure that rural spaces are under. Risaf bears the burden of a certain kind of reproduction, that of cultural life, even as the ritual and material forms that support this reproduction are made increasingly unsustainable. This chapter focuses on one particular example of the way that shifting economic and social possibilities make the successful practice of custom difficult: this has to do with the association of “home,” boma, inherited land, and burial place. Western Kenya is associated with a particularly strong attachment to burial “at home”—in rural, ancestral land. “Home,” “boma,” “inheritance,” and “burial place” are supposed to line up; these different meanings should be layered onto a single physical space. But increasingly the different functions are dispersed across different locations or do not exist at all, as when land holdings are too small even to subdivide for inheritance.

If social reproduction is already difficult and fraught with contingency, as anthropologists have often pointed out, what specific role do road accidents play? Are they simply a flashpoint for a wider experience of uncertainty, or do they shape the challenges of social reproduction in a specific way? Perhaps both. At a material level, it is clear that poor, rural people are more vulnerable to the long-term effects of road death and injury than others. Kenya’s road accidents disproportionately affect lower socio-economic strata (Azetsop 2010; Odero et. al. 2003). More, reduced public expenditure on health care since structural adjustment has meant that rural populations have to shoulder more of the cost than before. Hospital bills and funeral costs can often require the sale of productive resources like land, in spite of substantial assistance from networks of contribution.

At another level, the inexplicable quality of sudden death creates a particular kind of dilemma, one which is more acute than the more generalized experience of uncertainty, and which can provoke different kinds of outcomes (Keane 1997). The accident tears open social order; it is a moment when hidden tensions find a form of expression. Thus, accidental deaths become sites of dispute and dissension. In an earlier, less automobilized, moment, road accidents were classified along with murder and suicide as “bad deaths,” deaths whose danger must be ritually contained.¹⁶¹ Today, a road accident does not carry this stigma—as with accidents elsewhere, road accidents have undergone a process of reclassification which separates them from other violent events and frees the victim from stigma (Green 1997). Nevertheless, accidents cannot go unexplained. They continue to solicit explanation, to raise the question of “why.” As a man pondering the deaths of his brother and son in automobile accidents told me:

I have had to think about it. To ask myself, why? If they had died from illness, I wouldn't have to ask this question.

Once raised, the question “why?” is not easily settled. The search for answers can lead to accusations and even a mournful attachment to the injury itself, a sense of its unresolvedness.

Responses to this question are rarely sought in road conditions or in driver behavior. These may answer the question of “how” but not of “why.” The debates I observed around responsibility for accidents—whether or not conducted in the idiom of the occult—more often questioned the proper fulfillment of kinship obligations than proper road behavior. Accidents became discussions about the right way to be connected to and care for one another. In turn, this

¹⁶¹ I was told that bodies being carried home for burial would not be allowed to enter the compound through the front gate but rather had to come in around the back, or through a hole made in the hedge that normally surrounds a compound. This is a kind of “sneaking in” that doesn't disrupt official order while nevertheless allowing the body to be buried. They would be buried in the dark of night, by hired diggers or *wajomba* (maternal uncles); other family members were not allowed to attend.

opened up discussions about the justness of the existing *rules* prescribing ways to care, to be connected, and to belong.

It is in this sense that accidents as events can be said to transform a more general experience of uncertainty in the context of changing rural space. Accidents shifted the *uncertainty* of rural life into *contingency*—they brought into explicit speech the idea that “a fundamental but ultimately inexplicable antithesis exists between the way things exist and the possibility that they might be otherwise” (Morris 2008, 18). At the same time, for the anthropologist, they revealed that the work of making contingency apparent doesn’t just “happen.” An experience of contingency—a sense that the world and its rules might not be naturally given and that they might in fact be *wrong*—doesn’t simply come into being. It is mediated through the tools of signification, in this case rumor, technology, and cultural practice. Notably, “risk” was not was not part of the vocabulary of these rumors.

III. THE TRAFFIC IN WOMEN

The Beautiful Corpse

In order to discuss how accidental events also produced effects outside of an immediate family, I will return to the story I opened this chapter with. Here I discuss the circulation of debate around the event as well as some of the context, the “frames of sociality” (White 2010), which mediated the conversation. These frames included not only customs—and questions about the purchase of custom in the context of rural transformation—but also larger dynamics of

migration, technology, and agrarian change. In what follows I will additionally discuss another accident, also linked to a burial dispute in which kin struggled over the proper “place” of a young woman. I argue that it is not incidental that these rumors had to do with women, nor that they emerged following a road accident.

First, more on the “beautiful corpse.” To illustrate the level of abstraction at which this rumor circulated, let me first say that I never learned this woman’s name. This reflects the fact that none of the people I heard the rumor from knew personally any of the rumor’s “characters.” Unlike gossip, the rumor circulated independently of known persons. However, I did hear first-person accounts of the crash and its aftermath—a boda boda rider I knew had been on the road behind the funeral procession when the crash happened; I knew the chief of a nearby area, who had been called to the scene; and as I’ve mentioned one of the victims was related to my host family. This was a small world, then, but one still big enough for nameless rumor.

The woman’s husband and other relatives were transporting the body home for burial in a pickup. While overtaking a car on a decline (some said the brakes had failed), the pickup collided with a bus. The spot was a known black spot, a place where the road narrows and the angle sharpens going over the river Isiukhu. Everyone in the pickup died except the deceased woman’s husband, and tens of people from the bus were injured. The deceased was a young woman, said to be very beautiful, who I was told had died in childbirth. These kinds of accidents—fatal crashes that take place while “escorting” a corpse to its burial site—are frequently remarked on across Kenya, and are considered to have “doubled” the tragedy. Even more than other accidents, “twice deaths” (Lee 2011) have an uncanny quality. They provoke shock and sorrow, and carry the sense that some intentional force is at work.

The publicity and spectacular nature of the event contributed to the wide circulation of narratives around the accident. The stories revolved around the dead body itself. As the story unfolded I discovered that there had been a burial dispute that many saw as the cause of the accident. Though I'd first heard about the accident from Veronica, it was my friend Petronilla who first mentioned the rumors. She was from another part of western Kenya and lived in a settlement in Kakamega town. When we were having tea in town one afternoon she brought up the accident, and told me the corpse had caused it because of a dispute over her proper burial site. The deceased's husband had not finished paying bridewealth, Petronilla said, so she didn't properly belong to him but rather to her parental family. (In telling me this Petronilla called the parents, in English, her "owners.") This version said the in-laws—knowing their claim on the body was contested—had gone to the mortuary very early and rushed through the preparation of the body so that they could leave before the parental group arrived. These stories claimed as evidence the fact that the accident had happened very early in the morning, which suggested an improper act was taking place. This "evidence" was revealed to be a product of the narration itself—in fact, according to a local chief who had been called to the scene, the accident took place around 11am, a normal time for mourners to escort a body.

The accident and its meaning did not settle. The number of dead and injured, the spectacle of the funeral itself, and the eerie quality of a "twice death," kept the story going. I heard other versions of the story over the next few weeks (and even later). One persistent version, told to me in Shimalabandu, suggested that the woman had *not* died in childbirth. Here the story was that the husband had beaten his pregnant wife so badly that she lost her baby and

died after he'd taken her to the hospital. These tellers claimed that he had paid a doctor to lie about the cause of death and to claim a natural cause.

The most detailed version I heard came from Cyrus, a neighbor in Shimalabandu who had witnessed the accident while taking part in another burial procession that was following immediately behind. While visiting with Veronica (to whom he was related through her mother), he said that the woman and her husband had repeatedly separated and gotten back together because of the man's infidelity—which he threw in her face by bringing women to their house. She would return home to her parents' house and then the husband would go and get her to come back to him. This went on until he beat her so badly that she ended up in the hospital for several months, lost the baby she was carrying, and finally died. During this time the husband never visited her in the hospital and her maternal relations cared for her. But upon her death he claimed the body. Her relations, indignant that he seemed to care for her more in death than in life, refused. They insisted she was theirs, that they had given birth to her, and that she had only gone to his “place” (i.e. his residence, but also his “home,” the site of him as part of a lineage) as a guest. Cyrus explained quite radical statement—resisting dominant ideologies insisting that a woman belongs *to* her husband and *in* her husbands “place”—as a transformation enacted by the pain (*uchungu*) they felt as a result of the way he had treated her.

But, the story went on, the husband bribed the mortuary officials to release the body to him. An argument broke out at the mortuary when he took the body, and the hired driver of the vehicle for transporting the coffin refused to drive. He was replaced by the husband's brother. As they were leaving—the story's dramatic crescendo—the deceased woman's grandmother

proclaimed a curse. She declared that if the man had indeed harmed their daughter, the mourning party *would not reach its destination safely*.

Here the story hinged on a contradiction that made visible the place where forensic analysis meets—and even suppresses—the details of the case. As Cyrus was recounting the proclamation of the curse, Veronica interrupted to say that the grandmother *herself* had died in the accident—she asked why, if the grandmother was proclaiming a curse against the funeral party, had she gotten into the vehicle? Cyrus disputed whether she had been in the pickup, but because Veronica had been distantly related to this woman,¹⁶² her account couldn't be denied. This gave Cyrus pause, for a beat, but ultimately he just skipped over this detail and continued his story. And Veronica let her protest go, only muttering dimly, “if people want to dispute a burial then they should just go home instead of getting in the vehicle.” So the conversation moved on. The contradiction was patched over, as the narrative continued to shape the *dispute* into the ultimate cause of the accident. As James Siegel writes: “After the event, the uncanny event is claimed to have been anticipated” (2006: 118).¹⁶³

The Refusal of the Corpse

Those who explained the accident as the outcome of the injustice perpetrated by the husband and the subsequent burial dispute drew on established ideas about where bodies should be buried, what constitutes home and belonging, and the function of bridewealth and other marriage obligations. The rumors placed the story into a specific genre of stories, those in which

¹⁶² Making her related to the accident in two ways: through her marital family, and through her birth family.

¹⁶³ Siegel discusses here the nature of proof. The term was used so often in witchcraft cases, he writes, that he had to ask himself what it meant. “‘Proof’ means, first of all, ‘There is something strange.’ ... One might expect the opposite. In the face of bizarre happenings, there is no explanation. In effect, to say ‘proof’ is not to say ‘He did it, here is the evidence’ but ‘I knew it.’” (2006: 118).

a corpse “refuses” to be taken to its burial place. In these stories, the corpse is said to be rejecting the home that has been designated for it. On the news and in anecdotes, tales of corpse refusals appear across Kenya, usually linked to people from western Kenya. (The accident in question was also reported in a national newspaper as a corpse refusal.) These explanations are linked first, to the idea that corpses should be buried at “home”—in their ancestral homeland, and on family land—and second, to the idea that the corpse might know where its proper “home” is, even when this contravenes the rules that families have followed in selecting the burial site. These stories often hinge on pre-existing tensions among kin about obligations unfulfilled or injustices perpetrated. The corpse’s refusal indicates that a wrong has been done, or that something has gone awry in the rituals of family or property, in such a way that home is not really a home (Schwartz 1995).

As a genre, corpse refusal stories are particularly interesting here for two reasons. The first is the way they both entrench and refuse the links between a person’s “home” and their burial place (by insisting that burial place is so important that a dead person would take action to avoid being buried in the wrong place). The second is the way they dramatize automobility, by allowing the corpse’s agency to act through the motor vehicle. The two reasons are linked: the details of motor technology are perceived as significant in part because automobility reorganized the process of dying and mourning—allowing for the more frequent travel in between rural and urban areas and a renewed attachment to ethno-spatial imaginaries attached to rural areas (particularly the former reserves).

The significance of the motor vehicle emphasizes how the history of mobility has changed what it means to die in Kenya. Traditions of carrying corpses home from urban to rural

areas for burial rely on motor vehicles, and funerary practices have evolved along with road and motor vehicle technology as well as other technologies of corpse preservation. Rebekah Lee's work on "mobile ways of dying" in South Africa similarly notes that contemporary funeral traditions are influenced by the long history of rural-urban migration and by the technologies that make this possible; these create "new subjectivities and new ways in which to imagine relations between the living and the dead" (2011:227). Western Province was deeply affected by rural-urban migration and today is known for the amount of money and effort that families spend transporting bodies back to rural areas for burial. Both Luyias and Luos (the two ethnic groups associated with western Kenya) are simultaneously mocked and admired for their attachment to this "tradition," longstanding though perhaps intensified in recent years.¹⁶⁴ And even deaths that take place *within* rural western Kenya, near home, are also marked by these practices—death in rural areas is also shaped by the history of migration. Bodies are kept in mortuaries to give relatives time to plan to travel to the funeral, usually in large buses. Funerals are often held on Saturdays, for the ease of out-of-town guests. And two days before the funeral, vehicles full of mourners carry the corpse home for viewing and burial. One effect of this urban-oriented timing is that in Kakamega town on Thursdays the streets around the mortuary and leading out of town are jammed with funeral processions "escorting" (*kisindikiza*) bodies home. This is best done amidst a revving of motors and a honking of horns, and mourning practices including singing, drinking, music, and genres of talking are performed inside the vehicle over the course of the

¹⁶⁴ As John Lonsdale notes in his response to *Burying SM*, the sense that rural/home burials are a *requirement* has varied over time. In the early post-independence period, urban residents were often buried in urban areas rather than transported back to rural areas. The current emphasis on "home" burial seems to be both an effect of increased emphasis on ethnicity in recent years—in which western Kenyans distinguish themselves from those who will bury "anywhere"—and the improved road network, which facilitates the transport of bodies. The impetus for such distinction is itself possibly linked to the renewed ethnicization of politics.

journey. Motor vehicles are thus not just a transport technology, but an active participant in funerals.

This explains why contemporary corpse refusal stories feature narrative elements linked to the motor vehicles in which corpses are carried. The vehicle mediates the transfer but also represents the space and time in between mortuary and burial. In this liminal moment, the corpse can take action and its refusal is usually effected *through* the motor vehicle. As refusal stories are usually dramatized, the corpse prevents the vehicle from moving in some way. The vehicle has no problem moving backward, but won't move forward; a mechanic is called and finds nothing mechanically wrong with it. Mourners seek the reason for its refusal, they implore the corpse or apologize to it, and sometimes they turn the coffin around to confuse the corpse so that the vehicle can continue on its way. Most stories explain how mourners manage to persuade or trick the corpse. For instance, a driver in Gaakwen told me that once he was asked to carry a body back to western Kenya. He said every time they put the corpse in his truck, it refused to move, but was fine when they took the body out. Finally, he came up with the solution: he only put enough petrol in the truck to reach the nearest town. Arriving there, he would again fill up with only a small amount. In this way he managed to get the body to its "home."

The relationship between the living and the dead here is one in which the living seek to evade the power of the dead. I never heard an example in which mourners *listened* to the corpse's desires and changed the burial site, even as they might search for the cause of its refusal. But road crashes were sometimes explained as the corpse's action of last resort. When the refusal has not been heard, the accident is an insistent way for the corpse to regain its agency.

This, then, was one of the explanations for the accident involving the beautiful corpse. And in both this and Cyrus's narration of the grandmother's curse, the mechanical, material, and moral were mixed to both amplify the event and grant it an uncanny quality. Cyrus's telling of the story dramatized both the grandmother's curse, and the erratic behavior of the vehicle itself. He said the driver who had been hired to drive the pickup had abandoned the job when he saw the dispute at the mortuary, and the husband's brother had stepped in to drive—the fear of the hired driver was used to portend the danger of accident. He narrated how the vehicle was weaving on the road and lost control when it reached the hill. The brakes or steering failed, it veered one way and nearly hit another car, veered back and forth, and then hit the bus. The pickup went off the bridge and down into the river. Veronica said she had been in town when the accident happened and accounts quickly reached her that described the way the corpse and the coffin were bobbing around in the water. The disfigurement of her face was also a salient detail, Cyrus saying that the glass on the coffin's window had sliced her face, while Veronica said she was beautiful anyway. She said she had hesitated to look at the body during the public viewing, fearing that it had rotted, but that she was still beautiful. She said, “you would never know that she had been beaten, that she had died, that she had lain in the mortuary for months, that she had then died again.” Attention to unexpected material behavior served as evidence of an agency beyond the ordinary. The mysteries of both the mechanical and the corporeal, crystallized in the corpse's sublime beauty, made it more than an everyday tale.

The return of the repressed through technology is a theme that has been addressed by scholars interested in the way that modern reality can be defamiliarized and re-enchanted

(Gunning 1995). Here, technology becomes “uncanny” in its ability to connect to the spirit world. In the genre of the refusal story, modern rationality (represented by the automobile accident) is defamiliarized through the enchantment of the motor’s operation. The details of technological operation are mobilized in order to reveal the agency of the dead. But one might also see the corpse’s refusal as a gesture toward unveiling the strangeness of motor vehicles themselves, which move at killer speeds (and which disguise the repeated violence of crashes as an ever-singular “accident”).

Or, given the significance of the *home* in corpse refusal stories, one might notice the idea of home embedded in Freud’s word for the uncanny, *unheimlich*, “unhomely.” Freud (1948) argues that the meanings of *heimlich* (homely, familiar, or hidden) and *unheimlich* (unhomely) converge. The bringing to light of the secret (un-heimlich) produces the effect of the uncanny. The familiar becomes strange as the home becomes not a home. Consider the wider context in which corpse refusals and burial disputes were taking place. Many theorists argue that these emerge out of the conflicting senses of belonging emerging out a tension between urban lives and rural homes. But my research suggests that these conflicts can occur even when no migration has taken place. In much of my time in Shimalabandu, when residents spoke of the numbers “wanunuzi” (“buyers,” i.e. outsiders purchasing land) who were moving in to their village, I had the sense that they were experiencing their “home” becoming “unhomely.” Without having moved at all, they were becoming estranged because the place itself was changing around them.

These changes—occurring not just in Shimalabandu but more widely in Kakamega County, as high land values made selling an attractive option, help to explain why it mattered so much where the young woman’s body was buried. The links between home, burial, and

belonging were under pressure, but all the more vehemently claimed for that very reason. And women played a very specific role in this process, as the next section explains.

Burial Disputes

The link between a person's (rural) "home" and their burial site has been widely discussed in literature on Kenya and neighboring countries (Schwartz 1995; Geschiere 2005; Cohen and Atieno Odhiambo 1992; Lee 2011). In western Kenyan custom, bodies should be interred "at home." "Home" means one's place of origin, and origin refers to a site of ethnic belonging, inevitably rural. Thus death and belonging are linked, which explains in part why huge amounts of work are done to recover, prepare, transport, and inter bodies. But "home" is, of course, complex and becoming more so as the rural itself is transforming. As the material conditions for preserving custom change, the pressure of bearing the weight of the (ethnic) customary creates its own fractures. Death, especially unexpected death, makes those fractures visible.

Attempts to stabilize the messiness of life in burial—to spatially secure belonging by fixing a body in the ground—frequently give rise to burial disputes. These disputes occur when more than one family member claims the right to bury a body, and are frequently adjudicated in court; they are common enough among Kenya's Luo- and Luyia-identifying communities to have given rise to a micro-genre of writing about them (Cohen and Atieno Odhiambo 1992; Musila 2008; Schwartz 1995; Whyte 2005). Burial disputes reveal the complexity of what "home" can mean, and the extreme measures that parties will go to in order to try to fix this meaning (including disinterring already-buried bodies). The best known account of a burial dispute,

Burying SM (Cohen and Odhiambo 1992), uses the court battle over the body of Nairobi lawyer S.M. Otieno to examine the shifting and contested meanings of “home” for elite urbanites with both rural and urban attachments.¹⁶⁵ In *Burying SM*, however, the lines of fracture are not quite the ones I explore here—the dispute between SM Otieno’s kin and his wife over his body mapped onto a tension between rural-ethnic and urban-cosmopolitan belonging. His kin tried to assert the “moral authority of the rural” as against alternative attachments of the city and individual choice. What, then, are the lines of fracture for a burial dispute around a woman “at home?”

Most burial disputes play out between kin-by-birth and kin-by-marriage. They are moments where the ties of alliance and lineage—long seen in the anthropological literature as a potential source of tension or structural contradiction (Gluckman 2002, Fortes 1970, Richards 1950)—pull in different directions: literally, toward different “homes.” For western Kenyan *men*, the “home” of birth and that of marriage are—at least definitionally—the same. Thus burial disputes over men’s bodies arise almost only in cases of urban migration: a socio-spatial displacement is needed to bring alliance and lineage into conflict. In the case of women, however, such displacement is constitutive of their construction as woman. In the western Kenyan context, a woman is by definition someone who moves, who has two families. Thus

¹⁶⁵ The SM Otieno case offered a site in which the association of home with rural-ness and ‘culture’ was interrogated—SM’s desire to be buried in land he had bought outside Nairobi, rather than land he was ethnically attached to, allowed the assertion of a modern, urban form of belonging; it also revealed the way that assertions about culture are crafted in such moments of tension. *Burying SM* asks, was SM’s true home the one he shared with his wife, or was it his rural place of origin?

even as “home” is described as a fundamental identity linked to land, inheritance, and birth,¹⁶⁶ a woman’s home for the purposes of burial is designated by marriage.

Both the displacement from and the ongoing connection between a woman her birth family are given a material form: bridewealth. Recall that some of the rumors around the beautiful corpse suggested that the cause of the burial dispute had been unpaid bridewealth. The bridewealth given for a woman binds her to her husband’s family but also, in requiring a return gift, creates an ongoing connection between the families.¹⁶⁷ Bridewealth both mediates and symbolizes the exchange. The fact that the relationship is synecdochally manifested in the bridewealth payment can also allow for the dissolution of marriage in some contexts—the fact that bridewealth can be *returned* allows an element of reversibility in marriage arrangements which is not present in the “till death do us part” formulation (Parkin 1980). But often money to return bridewealth, or the logic of the payment itself,¹⁶⁸ make this difficult, so a woman simply returns to her parents’ home or moves into rental housing when a marriage breaks up. This allows the husband to claim her even after her death, so long as he has paid bridewealth. As

¹⁶⁶ Home is defined as the place one’s placenta is buried. In the case of women, home is where their *children’s* placentas are buried. Susan Whyte’s work on burial disputes suggests that the burials of non-prominent rural women provide more complex fodder for thinking about the meanings of home and belonging than those of prominent men for precisely this reason. She writes that “ordinary women’s” burials are more interesting than men’s because women move from one site of belonging to another in the course of their lives (Whyte 2005).

¹⁶⁷ Alliance theory resolves the dilemma of women by claiming that it is these very exchanges that found society. Nevertheless, an underlying uncertainty, a sense of anxiety around women’s loyalty or true belonging in their place of marriage is visible in popular discourse and explanations of women’s family roles in western Kenya. Women are considered somehow “unmoored.” One justification for the traditional denial of women’s inheritance in western Kenya is that this would cause “chaos” because women, by definition, are those who leave (Cohen & Odhiambo 1992). More recently, I’ve been told that it is considered dangerous for a woman to stay too long with her birth family—it courts the possibility of a curse. Above all, married women should not be buried at their parents’ home, because it might lead to granddaughters who never marry. In “custom,” parents are encouraged to push their daughters out, even as in reality, parents often provide homes for both returned and unmarried daughters and for grandchildren born out of wedlock or otherwise unwelcome in their fathers’ homes.

¹⁶⁸ In theory, divorces can be granted in exchange for returned bridewealth, but this is complicated in practice. In some cases, the technicalities of bridewealth mean that a woman can come to “own herself”—such that the property relation itself grants her freedom from male authority (Parkin 1980).

Nancy Schwartz writes of similar cases in Luo areas of western Kenya, the “freedom to leave bad marriages... did not always follow [women] into death” (Schwartz 1995).

Accidental death creates challenging negotiations when bridewealth is at stake, because the accident forces an unexpected termination to the ongoing processes of exchange that constitute marriage. It makes visible the failures of idealized custom (and functionalist analysis) to account for the contingent possibilities of life. Bridewealth payments are often paid slowly over a long period of time, but they must be concluded by the time of burial. In order for a man to have the right to bury his wife, his family must have paid bridewealth for her. In order for a woman to attend the funeral of her husband, his family must have paid bridewealth. And not to attend the funeral opens oneself up to a curse. Burials are thus moments of settling accounts, accounts that are at once financial and social.¹⁶⁹ One effect of premature deaths, then, is to force bridewealth to *come due*. Here, then, is another way of thinking about burial disputes. Burials are also moments where the tension between the idealized equivalent exchanges that are supposed to underpin social relations—bridewealth for women—and the much messier practice often comes to a head.

The accident makes visible a larger sense of uncertainty surrounding death and belonging, here expressed in the language of bridewealth. But the dispute around the death also questions the logic of bridewealth as a means of stabilizing belonging, perhaps giving rise to an awareness of the contingency of social formations. We should not forget the *other* rumors, those

¹⁶⁹ These accounts can also be carried forward from previous generations. In order for a man to get married, his father must have finished paying bridewealth for his mother. If this was not completed, and its incompletion was suppressed at the moment of marriage, it might become visible in the form of a curse, or it might affect the father's ability to bury his daughter-in-law.

which claimed the dispute was not about bridewealth but about domestic violence. These stories claimed that the woman's birth family claimed her body because the husband had not properly cared for her. The family's claim that the body belonged to them *because they had given birth to her* was radical precisely because it displaced the stabilizing role of bridewealth. In asserting belonging as tied to care rather than to marriage and its rituals, the family rejected exchange as the basis of a claim to property or belonging. Instead, they asserted the logic of birth, within which the maintenance of their daughter's wellbeing was paramount. The birth relationship was a relationship of care: because the husband had caused her pain, they had a right to assert their claim.¹⁷⁰

Bridewealth was both invoked and displaced in the rumors, with some granting unpaid bridewealth explanatory force and others rejecting the idea that bridewealth alone should determine where a body belongs. Bridewealth has long been a flashpoint for tensions around historical change—since the early colonial period when bridewealth payments went through a process of inflation, the payment, and the difficulty of paying it, has been a source of generational dispute (Shadle 2006). The much-described “crisis of youth” and difficulties in attaining the status of adult are linked to problems in affording bridewealth. Informal unions are common. This history has made bridewealth a powerful symbol and an available idiom for discussing social tensions, one that condenses contemporary anxieties about the material

¹⁷⁰ In Whyte's discussion of burial disputes in Bunyole, a strikingly similar formulation appears: a mother recounts how her daughter's husband came to claim her after her death: “In eight years he never came to see her or to help. But when she died, he wanted the body” (2005: 161). The family asserted the right of affection as against that of exchange. Unable to afford to pay back their daughter's bridewealth, however, they had to let her be buried as “his place.” Whyte reads this relationship through Meyer Fortes' (1969) distinction between the “deliberate calculation” that defines affinal relationships and the “affection” or “altruism” that characterizes kinship of birth. But one must be careful about a simple opposition between “care” and “property.” Within bridewealth negotiations, paternal families often use the way they have cared for their daughter as a negotiating tool. The potential value of the woman to the husband—though her health, her beauty, her skills—is presented as the outcome of a history of familial care. In the developmentalist feminism of contemporary Kenya, these forms of care are even more transparently presented as investments: a woman's level of education, for instance, gives her greater value.

constraints that make the fulfillment of “custom” increasingly difficult. As Jean and John Comaroff write, marriage and bridewealth are among the rituals which most powerfully “construct and control social reality”; they are central sites of “meaning and its management” (Comaroff 1980). Bridewealth functions like a narrative element in stitching together the meaning of people’s lives, which is evident in the fact that it appeared in rumors as a means of describing forms of disconnection and rupture within the marriage. To put it differently, bridewealth is the name for both the successes and the failures of marriage; placing the blame on an unfinished payment is a means of demonstrating that the marriage *itself* was unfinished. This allows the institution of marriage to remain intact, by locating the rupture in its lack of completion.

The focus on unpaid bridewealth within some rumors also functioned to occlude a deeper tension. Despite the fact that the man *had* fulfilled his customary obligations, the accident happened nonetheless. His failure of care was not one that could be described through a misalignment of custom and practice. Rather, it was a misalignment between the practices of custom and a social reality that no longer entirely fit that custom. As Hylton White argues, even when properly practiced, the rituals of custom cannot always “fix” the social disruption and disconnection that are perceived as making communities vulnerable to injury. Indeed, the deeper fear is that practice itself “may lose its purchase on context, issuing in anxiety, disorientation, and disconnection” (White 2010).

To consider further what these displacements might be, I turn to a second accident story that circulated in Shimalabandu. This story also recounted the death of a young woman in a road crash, and a family dispute around who was to bury her body.

Khayota

Where the “beautiful corpse” was said to have caused an accident because she didn’t want to be buried in her husband’s land, in this second story it was the accident itself which caused a burial dispute. But like the first, this story explicitly turned on, and generated conversation around, what it means to be a woman. It revealed an anxiety around the shifting of gendered hierarchies around wealth.

Khayota’s was a less spectacular accident, of the kind that regularly occur on the A1 highway as it passes through Kakamega County. The accident happened late at night and was a “self-involved” accident. That is, the vehicle didn’t collide with any person or any other moving vehicle. It just went off the road and crashed. Despite its banality, the accident nevertheless generated a number of rumors. These circulated locally in Shimalabandu, tracing out a more confined public than the previous accident. In my reading, these rumors shaped the accident and subsequent dispute into a conversation over the nature of woman-ness, even as those closer to it resisted these interpretations.

The first I heard of Khayota was when one night when Veronica’s sisters-in-law came to pick her up so they could go to an overnight wake together. Rain kept them in the house for a while, and they started gossiping. As the conversation somehow turned to women who “bought” children, they mentioned Khayota, a woman from Butso, as someone who had bought hers.¹⁷¹ Having brought her up, they then commented that she had died in an accident. She had been traveling in her car with her lover (or younger husband) and another man. The husband/lover

¹⁷¹ I initially thought that “buying children” might just be a way of talking about adoption, but it turned out to be a more specific rumor about women who pay doctors to give them children whose parents want to give them up.

alone survived. They mentioned that there had been a burial dispute over her corpse because Khayota's parents had wanted to bury her on *their* land, rather than on that of her husband/lover. The corpse stayed in the mortuary for several months while this dispute played out.

The women claimed that the dispute hinged both on whether Khayota's husband had paid bridewealth, and on her parentage. The parents, I was told, claimed the body because the man hadn't paid bridewealth, but the man contested their claim by maintaining that they were not really her parents. Ultimately, the story went, the court ruled in his favor, stating that her kin could not claim her. In this story, all of the relationships that should locate Khayota in networks of descent and alliance were opaque. Her children were possibly "bought." Her parentage was uncertain—Veronica and her in-laws debated whether her mother had been married abroad and lived there. They claimed Khayota was now on her second marriage, to a younger man (if in fact she was married at all). She (or possibly her mother) had previously been married to a Westerner/foreigner (*mzungu*), and Khayota was a woman of means. This they agreed on, with comments about her meanness. They said that once, when workers working a farm adjacent to hers had come to ask her for water, she would not give them any—even though she had a well on her property. In addition to working her own land, she also rented land and had recently made a substantial sum from rented sugar cane. Her partner was younger than she, and a radio presenter at the Luyia-language radio station, Mulembe FM. One sister said not only that Khayota had gotten him this job, but also that she "dressed him" (i.e. bought and chose his clothes). Indeed, he was described as an accessory to her. Whether this man or her parents had a right to her corpse—and by extension, to her property—was at the heart of the dispute, and the motivation for the struggle was presented as a desire to access her wealth.

Later versions of the story, which I heard two or three more times in Shimalabandu, suggested that these interpretations were not so much accurate readings of Khayota's situation as attempts to explain the burial dispute based on limited information about her: they were the version of the story that comes at the end of a game of Broken Telephone. The main thing that was known was that Khayota was a woman of means and had recently earned a lot of money from rented sugar cane; this and the fact that she was, somehow, the source of her husband's property. These facts made unstable the relations of belonging and identity through which people are located in western Kenya (however idealized these patterns might be)—if his success was owed to her, how could she belong to him/his land? Indeed, the opacity of both her lineage and her affiliation revealed that under the surface, these stories were constructing an implicit argument about Khayota's status as a woman: neither parents, spouse, or even children could be confirmed—indeed, Khayota was not a woman at all.

Gayle Rubin's discussion of the "sex/gender system" is helpful for thinking about what happens here. Re-reading Lévi-Strauss, Rubin suggests that alliance theory might offer radical potential insofar as it suggests that there is nothing biologically innate about what it means to be a woman. Rather, women are created *as* women by the systems that construct gender through the relationship of the social to the exchange of women. "What," she asks, "are the relationships by which a woman becomes the prey of man – are they the same as those by which a woman becomes a woman?" (Rubin 1975). The rumors about Khayota invert this equation, suggesting that a woman who does not belong to a man is not a woman at all. That is, the rumors read her wealth backwards onto her relationships of belonging such that it cast doubt on other elements of her 'womanness.' The uncertainty about her status as object of exchange filtered through the

story and made uncertain the other relationships that located her in a sex/gender system—attributing uncertainty to her lineage, and even questioning her ability to bear children. The point was even made explicitly: Veronica’s sisters noted that the burial dispute was like a dispute over inheritance, making it so that “she is like the man in her relationship.” What was interesting about these rumors was the way that the uncertain affinal exchange—the fact that Khayota was not *given* to the man, but rather *gave* to him—then cast doubt on her lineage relationships, parentage and children. The instability was partially stabilized by making the dispute appear to be one about bridewealth—when explained as a dispute over an unfinished bridewealth payment, Khayota’s uncertain status as daughter and money could partially be made sense of and the man, in turn, described as somewhere in between a husband and a lover.

However, I heard yet another version of the story from Jackson (the boda boda rider mentioned in Chapter 3). This painted a rather different picture. Khayota was indeed a woman of means: she had gotten her husband an administrative job at the radio station, she had funded the building of their house, she was a landowner, and she had bought their car. And her parents were also not quite her parents—she had been raised by her mother’s relations, that is, “*ujombani*.” Ujombani translates literally as “the place of maternal uncles,” but it more generally refers to maternal relations (and often mother’s parents). In Western Kenya, whether because of marital disputes, remarriages, or children born out of wedlock, many children are raised by their maternal relations even while being told that their true site of belonging—*kwao*, “their place”—is with their father’s family. Khayota’s father was known but did not have a relationship with her, thus her lineage belonging was not entirely clear.

Jackson claimed that Khayota was firmly located in her husband's family. She had not been previously married; the couple's three children were declared to look unambiguously like their father; and the house, while built with her money, was built in his family's household compound, on his ancestral land. Furthermore, the couple's relationship was said to have been a very close one: they were deeply in love. While others had presented the dispute as one over money, this teller declared the husband to have been deeply affected by his wife's death, depressed to the point of illness, barely recovered over a year after her death.

This seemingly more accurate version of the story brought in another element as the object of the dispute. The man liked to drink. In fact, Jackson knew the couple because as a boda rider he was often called to bring them alcohol. Usually they drank at home, the husband's concession to Khayota, but sometimes they went out. On this occasion, they had gone out, leaving their newborn at home.¹⁷² They'd gone with the husband's brother and a worker from the farm, both of whom also died in the accident.

Jackson said that Khayota's maternal relations had contested the burial with the argument that the husband, driving drunk, had been careless with their daughter and had caused her death. He believed, like others, that this claim was ultimately about accessing Khayota's money. This cynical argument suggested that her family mobilized the language of proper road use to make a claim on her wealth. At the same time, it opened up (like the previous rumor) the possibility that it was possible to contest the rights of husbands on the basis of other logics, whether care or road regulations. Here, the construction as an intentional harm—expressed in the terminology of drunk driving—drew not on occult causation but on road safety/regulatory language that

¹⁷² The teller said this as though to indicate that some sort of power had been at work in saving the baby. This was the only place in the story where a reference to occult intervention appeared.

describes road deaths as “preventable” and describes certain actions as crimes. It, too, contests the concept of true “accident” as sufficient explanation for a road death.

But the maternal relations’ argument did not prevail in court. I was not able to locate the court records, but according to the versions I heard, the court did not accept the maternal relations’ claim to be Khayota’s real parents. In a way, the response does not seem to answer the question that was asked—assuming, that is, that Khoyota’s *wajomba* had actually based their case on the recklessness of the driver. This was an argument based in traffic law, but the court ruled on a different question—not the question of who was at fault for her death, but that of to whom she *belonged*. This final version of the story constructed an argument that reaffirmed patriarchal custom. As long as the husband had paid bridewealth, his role in the accident should not affect his right to bury his wife.

The story and the process of telling it thus seemed to support an ideal social construction in which property, identity, and ancestry are merged such that a daughter only belong to her father’s people or her husband’s, and property cannot pass via a lineage defined by women. Despite its brief intrusion, road safety language did not succeed in seriously affecting the meaning or moral of the story. The question of belonging was the one that, in Evans-Pritchard’s terms, “was socially relevant.” In the end, the car’s narrative function was linked not to its potential for accident—this despite the fact that the accident actually happened—but rather to its ownership, since it was, unusually, a car driven by a man but owned by his wife.

Each of these cases emphasizes the ongoing role of women in stabilizing belonging and social reproduction against the stresses of the present. They reveal intense anxieties around social

reproduction in a context in which social institutions and norms do not seem to shield communities from a sense of disintegration. If, from the outside, the contemporary rural is more than ever perceived as the fossilized site of ethnically defined tradition, from within it is clear that material conditions make it difficult for the social to sustain the burden of reproducing life and tradition. The cases thus made visible a debate over whether social institutions in their current forms are helpful or harmful. This debate is tied to the sense that the interlinked institutions that supported social reproduction—land, gender, and agricultural production—were being put together in new configurations.

I will now briefly return to my hosts Mzee Roberto and Veronica, to consider the intimate aftermath of an accident. While the stories described above help to understand how accidents take on local effectivity through their circulation in rumor, the aftermath of Xander's death revealed that the accident also becomes "effective" through the institutional and material possibilities it opens up. Disputes and discussions about causation are one way in which contingency makes itself real in a social world, but these effects can also be mediated through institutional forms like compensation.

IV. POSTSCRIPT—THE INSURANCE CASE

When I first met Mzee Roberto, four years after Xander's death, he told me that he had a case with the insurance company to get compensation for Xander's death. Later, he claimed he had never received any compensation, but neighbors asserted that he had. They said that he received a substantial amount, about five years after the accident, but also that the lawyer was

“crafty” and doled out the money in small amounts. The word in the community was that Mzee Roberto and family had “eaten” the money rather than investing it in a productive enterprise: more than one neighbor said if he had sold land to pay for the expenses of the accident, he *should* have used the compensation money to buy another piece of land. Mzee Roberto himself frequently repeated such statements about the importance of land, even as he saw himself as too old for farming. He explicitly told me on numerous occasions that one should never sell land unless to buy a larger piece elsewhere.

However, Roberto was engaged in several home improvement and investment projects that I saw unfold over the next several years. When I first met him, both his house and the rental rooms (*landis*¹⁷³) he’d built were made of mud, and did not have electricity. Over the years, he plastered and electrified both his house and the *landis*, added additional rental rooms, and built concrete bathrooms for the renters—allowing him to charge higher rent.

In this way, the accident and insurance mediated the conversion of agricultural land to real estate, a conversion that had effects beyond even the initial construction. In 2014, Mzee Roberto built *landis* on the widow’s property, to provide her with some income beyond what she was able to earn gathering wood and selling vegetables on the roadside. This was presented as an act of benevolence but was also a strategic move given that, in insurance law if not in custom, she was the rightful recipient of that money.

In 2016, the youngest son sold his plot to an out-of-towner who wanted to build a house. This earned him enough to buy a large plot of land in nearby Kabras where land was cheaper because it was further from Kakamega town and from the road. It also solved family conflicts

¹⁷³ The word “*landi*” comes from “*landhies*,” the quarters built for railway workers. They are usually rows of single-room accommodations.

that had arisen from his divorce from his first wife and his drinking problem, and which had played out through death threats against a sister who had recently left a bad marriage and was now living in Roberto's landis.¹⁷⁴ But significantly, it also meant that for the first time an *mnunuzi*, a "buyer," would be living within the land that had belonged to Mzee Roberto and his brothers and their families. And then, I discovered during Christmas phone calls in late 2016 that Veronica, too, had built landis on her property. In less than a decade, Mzee Roberto's 1.25-acre boma had gone from having four dwellings on it to having at least twenty-two, housing perhaps sixty people. Between the renters and the one buyer, what had been ancestral land was now real estate, and Shimalabandu was coming to seem increasingly like town.¹⁷⁵

In the context of such rapid change, it is understandable that people feel estranged from their homes and uncertain about what it means to belong—even as they may also benefit from these changes. This sense of estrangement is all the more intense because of the expectation that rural spaces be sites of retreat and recuperation. David Neves and Andries du Toit argue for South Africa that "de-agrarianizing" rural spaces continue to play an important role in holding together fragmented lives even as the land is longer the sole or primary locus of production or income generating activities. Rural households, they argue, are the linchpins of households "stretched" among multiple locations. They are "crucial locales for social reproduction and sites

¹⁷⁴ At around the same time, another of Roberto's daughters also returned, so both these daughters and their children were living in the boma. Before her marriage, the younger daughter Maria had had a child with a neighbor and that child had lived with Roberto and Gogo since he was very young. Though they clearly loved the boy and spoiled him, the entire boma frequently told him that eventually he'd have to back "kwao," to his place, i.e. to live with his father. When Maria returned she commented frequently on the fact that the boy didn't recognize her as his mother because he'd grown up with his grandparents. This small story illustrates the way that idealized social exchanges—of women, children, and households—were far more complex in practice.

¹⁷⁵ It must be noted that in most of the insurance and compensation cases I learned about, the material transformations didn't play out this way. In case after case, accident victims and their families discussed being led on by insurance lawyers who took their documents and then were never heard from again; or told me that they had pursued compensation only to feel unsatisfied.

for recuperation, retreat, retirement and risk mitigation in relation to urban locales and labour markets” (2013:94). My research in Shimalabandu suggested that while this *was* an ideal projected onto rural life, households struggled to fulfill this role. Extremely high divorce rates meant that daughters were returning to their parents’ bomas, not only putting a strain on resources but also on customs which held that daughters should not remain “at home.” Thus residents felt themselves exposed to the forces of contingency in ways that were exacerbated by inexplicable death.

In this chapter, I have focused on injurious events as sites of social discussion—examining how, by virtue of their sudden and inexplicable qualities, road accidents provoke survivors to ask themselves what went wrong such that this event could take place. These discussions were not limited to questions of driving behavior and road condition, but also social conditions—and especially unsettled ones.

These cases also speak to something more general—the way that contingency can emerge within the social. Road accidents’ unexpected nature and violence makes them unsettling, even as their occurrence in public makes them more visible and thereby more available for widespread conversation than other deaths. In asking the question of “why” something happened, these stories altered a collective sense around the rules that govern social life, by suggesting that accidents are what happens when these rules are contravened. The accident thus provided a language and a material context through which contingency was constructed. Debates and disputes around what caused an accident and what should be done in its aftermath incorporated questions about property, care, home and belonging, the status of women, and the operation of

technology. This process of discussion did more than bring social institutions to bear on the questions generated by the accident, however—the converse also happened. The public discussion was a means through which the accident contributed to a social process: one in which unsettled matters were aired and explored, and norms and customs questioned.

In relation to the road accident, this chapter has asked the question of how contingency takes shape in social life. Unlike the respondents of previous chapters, who sought to dispel contingency and tame accident by naming it as risk, the rumors and accusations of this chapter deal with the accident as the expression of an intention. Nevertheless, they allowed the possibility of contingency to appear in the idea that things could be otherwise than they are. In the next chapter, I will examine quite a different kind of “intentional accidents”—accident caused by truck drivers who wish to sell cargo. As in this chapter, epistemological questions are mediated both through semiotic constructions and through the material consequences of the event. However, as we will see, these discussions take a different direction.

INTENTIONAL ACCIDENTS AND THE REMAINDER

Chapter Six

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the Lord your God.

—Leviticus 15:8

I. DIVERSIONS

By 2013, Gaakwen had become one of East Africa's busiest truck stops. Day and night, trucks and tankers bearing commodities passed through the truck stop, ascending west, to Kenya's western counties and the landlocked countries of East Africa, or descending east, toward Nairobi and the coast. Westward travel was more heavily laden: the cargo crawling up the Rift Valley escarpment toward the border mostly consisted of manufactured goods imported through the port of Mombasa or from the industries of Nairobi; petroleum products; raw material for making cement. Trucks moving eastward carried agricultural produce and minerals for export, or sometimes they were empty, returning to the coast to be reloaded. Gaakwen's bustling rest-stop economy thrived on servicing and surveilling this transport. Truckers stopped to eat or spend the night, leaving behind some of their "mileage" (their spending money for the trip) and creating a market for products and labor drawn from surrounding rural areas.

Sometimes truckers would reverse the direction of the transaction: instead of offering cash for goods, they offered goods for cash. Facilitated by a network of roadside dealers, drivers

would convert bits of what they were carrying—cargo or fuel—into money. Like Gaakwen’s “licit” economy, this trade was also made possible by the fact that, as a truck stop, Gaakwen was a site at which the infrastructure of the trade route came into contact with the rural hinterland. This interface made “diversions” possible, through the mediation of networks of brokers who facilitated the diversion of cargo out of their “predestined pathways” (Appadurai 1984) and into the rural spaces that provided markets for it. In a previous chapter, I discussed the way truckers’ money threaded its way through the truck stop and accumulated in various shapes and forms, especially as real estate. Here, I keep my focus tightly on the road and the roadside, and on the transactions that created bridges between them.

The “traffic” between road and roadside did not necessarily happen smoothly: it was marked by—and even reliant upon—risky and sometimes destructive activities. Gaakwen reputation as a black spot was directly linked by Gaakwen residents and others to the economic activities of truckers and Gaakwen-based brokers. These were said to cause accidents, and they did: one of the more infamous ways that drivers and brokers accessed cargo was through a practice known as the “intentional accident,” *ajali ya makusudi*. This was when drivers crashed their tractor-trailers, on purpose, in order to make cargo available for taking. Such accidents were an extreme example of risk-taking, but many of the practices through which commodities were “diverted” at Gaakwen relied on a skillful management of contingency. The drivers and brokers involved in this trade viewed themselves as experts in risk management—as, quite literally, entrepreneurs: those who take on risk in the hope of profit. At Gaakwen, then, accidents, entrepreneurship, and crime blurred together, making it notorious for “risky” activities of all kinds.

The coming together of transnational trade with rural economies in Gaakwen offers a particularly direct site at which to examine ideas long of interest to scholars of “African” economic practice, who have been concerned with the multiple influences shaping the economies of formerly colonized and often impoverished spaces, as well as the experience of volatility and uncertainty these intersections have produced. These scholars have generated a range of concepts to account for the sense that more than one influence is at work in producing economic concepts and practices in these sites: “interface,” “frontier,” “articulation,” “interpenetration” (Comaroff 1985; Chalfin 2004; Ferguson 2006; Guyer 2004). A sense of in-betweenness characterizes many of these accounts. As Hull and James write, “[African] economies are situated, somewhat contradictorily, between global settings of financialized capitalism ... and impoverished local arenas” (Hull and James 2012). While this sense of interstitiality is useful for understanding the diversity of influences shaping economic practice in globally marginalized economies, it has also produced dichotomous conceptions of economic life (embedded-disembedded; marketized-social; formal-informal); which often do not fully recognize how the interface *itself* produces specialized forms of economic practice.

In this chapter, I seek to move beyond an examination of diverse influences as they work together *at* an interface, to consider instead the economic rationalities produced *by* the interface. Exploring how Gaakwen’s traders negotiate the hazards and opportunities provided by the uneven development made visible by the coming together of highway and hinterland, I show how difference, or what Jane Guyer might call “asymmetry” (2004), both allows certain kinds of transactions to take place and produces logics that enact, explain, and justify them. Gaakwen was situated between the outward facing, mostly regulated economy that was represented by

containerized international cargo, and marginalized rural economies that were unevenly integrated into global capitalism. Yet the economic practices and concepts that I observed in Gaakwen were not so much a mix of, say, “market” and “cultural” logics as rationalities produced by difference itself. Road dealers in Gaakwen made the most of marginality and asymmetry—they took advantage of opportunities for arbitrage; they mobilized histories of rural underdevelopment and economic marginalization to legitimize themselves as “social bandits” (Hobsbawm); and, intriguingly, they described their own profit as *residual* or marginal.

As I will explore throughout this chapter, commodities were diverted from highway pathways through hazardous practices that constructed profits as a kind of inverted value. Whether by insisting on the contingency of profit, or by describing profit in terms of a remaindered amount—a “leftover”—rather than a necessary quantity, Gaakwen’s dealers produced an understanding of value that was understood primarily through *difference*.

While I argue that these frameworks for understanding exchange are produced by the “interface” and the asymmetry entailed within it, this does not mean that Gaakwen’s exchanges occurred in a conceptual or practical vacuum. Traders drew on ideas of contingency, value, and appropriate engagement with hazard that were derived from discourses of entrepreneurship circulating widely in liberalized Kenya; from culturally-inflected concepts of rights and obligations; from disciplinary frameworks that sought to contain road risk and govern through it; and from histories of rural marginalization and failed claims on redistribution. Among other things, my research revealed that discourses of “risk” had far more purchase in Gaakwen than discourses of “crime” as a frame through and against which traders defined their activities. But risk was not the only framework through which Gaakwen traders understood and calculated loss.

Gaakwen traders were engaged in what I call, borrowing from Janet Roitman, “playing with loss” (Roitman 2005). Their practices, and their highly self-aware justifications of those practices, engaged in different ways with the potential of radical loss, including death, destruction of property, and financial loss. This “play” drew on different logics. In what follows, I describe these as “salvage”—in which the accident produces remainders that can innocently be taken; “risk”—in which calculated engagement with possible loss allows the risk-taker to claim a profit; and “leakage”—in which the smallness of the loss allows it to escape.

This chapter takes inspiration from Jane Guyer’s longstanding interest in the economic rationalities that are generated by (and become visible at) interfaces. I draw on the discussion in *Marginal Gains* of “asymmetrical exchanges” and the “conversions” they require,¹⁷⁶ as well as Guyer’s method of describing economic concepts as they emerge from “experience in the world” (2004: 158), rather than from predetermined structures or systems. Here, I emulate Guyer’s method of beginning from practices (and metaphors) and inferring concepts from them. At the same time, I show that experiences are shaped *by* economic concepts—experiences become meaningful in relation to the frameworks that make sense of them. The ideas of “risk,” “loss,” and “profit” that I explore in this chapter are economic concepts which mediate between an experience and a decision as to its meaning. It is in this sense—as the sedimented experience of accidents shapes economic practice, and economic practice in turn affects the meaning of

¹⁷⁶ Drawing on a wide range of materials relating to monetary transactions in Atlantic Africa, Guyer proposes not only that many exchanges are “asymmetric”—occurring across differences in scale, in social position, or form of valuation—but also that asymmetry is an opportunity for gain. In the conversions required to transform what one exchange partner offers into the terms of the other partner comes the opportunity for a “marginal gain.” Guyer writes, “Negotiation on thresholds was profitable, and difference was thereby a resource to be cultivated” (2004: 42). The “margin” in “marginal gains” does several different kinds of work at once. It refers at once to economic theory’s understanding of profit margins (and therefore insists on the rationality of the transactions she describes); to Atlantic Africa’s “marginal” position within systems of global exchange; and to the “marginal” value of earnings that are made at moments of conversions (i.e. their relative smallness) (2004: 25). Conversions are also marginal in another sense, which comes out in Guyer’s account implicitly if not explicitly: they often work at the boundaries of established morality.

accident—that Gaakwen reveals how experience, practice, and conceptual framing work together to generate and stabilize ideas of contingency, value, and morality.

Risky Profits

Located on the western escarpment of the Great Rift Valley, Gaakwen sits at the bottom of a long slope. The road stretching up from what is now Gaakwen was known as a site of both accidents and banditry long before the truck stop existed. In fact, road bandits are said to have contributed to its creation—people say that bandits known as *kata waiya*, *kata hema* or *kiptil emaisiek* (“wire cutters” or “tarp cutters”) used to jump on the backs of trucks and slice off the tarpaulin covers. As the truck wove its way up the hill, they would toss the cargo into the dense roadside brush and forest. For this reason, trucks reaching the beginning of the hill when darkness was nearing began to spend the night at the bottom—afraid of cargo loss, mechanical failures on the straining ascent, and cold nights at the top. In the morning, they could climb the hill as a convoy. By 2013, many trucks, especially tractor-trailers carrying transit goods for the major transport corporations, pulled containers bearing monitored seals. Both the trucks and the seals on the backs of the containers were tracked by trucking companies or by private security companies hired for this purpose. If a truck deviated from its route plan, stopped for too long at the wrong place or the wrong time, or if the seal was broken, an alarm would go off at the fleet management center. Security staff were stationed at various stops along the way (Gaakwen among them) and patrolled the highway in pickup trucks so that in case of an alert or mechanical failure they could easily reach the site of the problem.

These increasingly sophisticated efforts to secure the trade route made “diverting” commodities more difficult, and more risky. Whereas the diversion of commodities into the rural hinterland had always relied on a degree of contingency—such as when accidents made commodities available to rural populations by spilling cargo on the highway—shifts in security practice converted this contingency into *risk*. Truckers and brokers began to engage in calculated risks, including specialized driving techniques and the practice known as the “intentional accident,” *ajali ya makusudi*. Because the violence of a crash and the resulting confusion could break the seal of a truck and make its contents available for appropriation, a driver might crash a truck on purpose to disguise the fact that he had sold the cargo or had entered into arrangements with a broker to break the seal and take the cargo. These techniques began to alter the meaning of accident itself. Many of the accident stories I heard in Gaakwen included accounts of peculiar driver behavior and of injuries, analyses aimed at establishing whether the injury and even the event itself were genuine or feigned. Whereas the distinction between (intentional) “crime” and “accident” has been a central legal and moral distinction in Western thought since the rise of industrial accidents (Foucault 1978; Witt 2004), at Gaakwen this distinction was elided.

Another kind of accident was also blamed on truckers’ desire for profit at the expense of safety, even though these weren’t as clearly intentional. These were the accidents attributed to a desire to sell fuel. Gaakwen was well known across Kenya as the site of a thriving, unregulated fuel trade. Most of this trade took the form of siphoning fuel from the reserve tanks of tractor-trailers, but the tanks of smaller lorries and even entire fuel tankers were also sometimes tapped. In the lore that surrounded Gaakwen, the availability of this fuel was linked to “freewheeling,” a practice in which drivers took their trucks out of gear to save on fuel. Whereas drivers seeking to

sell cargo would crash their trucks on the hill, freewheeling was said to cause the more deadly accidents on the straight flat stretch of highway through the heart of the township. When not in gear, the air brakes required to stop tons of metal and cargo barreling downhill don't work, and sometimes truckers could not re-engage the gears when they needed to, meaning that they entered Gaakwen, where the road narrowed and was lined with trucks parked on both sides, at full speed. Horrific crashes took place in Gaakwen: one person described to me the blood and bodies that had once been strewn across the place we were standing at that moment; another told of a truck flying across the parking area and crashing into the front of Muraya's Supermarket (a good 50 meters from the road). Speed bumps placed on the hill and increased road safety surveillance from 2012 onward made drivers less likely to freewheel—and accidents declined somewhat—but they still regularly took place through the time of writing in 2017.¹⁷⁷ Thus Gaakwen was said to be a “risky” place: risky not only in the sense that unexpected and destructive events happened there frequently, but also in the sense that its networks of trade, and their circuits of aspiration and prosperity, were perceived as the cause of destructive events. Gaakwen was seen not only as the *site* of but also the *source* of accidents. This sense was also reflected in the proliferation of risk-based public health campaigns directed at Gaakwen, including both road safety interventions and HIV prevention campaigns.

Gaakwen's entrepreneurs expressed complex relationships to the hazards of the road. On the one hand, they knew well that “risk reaps reward.” Brokers and drivers were skilled in negotiating the arbitrage possibilities offered at the juncture of rural hinterlands and highway

¹⁷⁷ In fact, as I write this, a series of bad accidents at Gaakwen has drawn renewed attention to the black spot. As is usual, the publicity elicits responses in varied forms (which are generally not sustained). The National Transport Safety Association (NTSA) has declared that they will install 24-hour surveillance cameras along the accident-prone stretch. Meanwhile Rachel Ruto, the deputy president's wife, led cleansing prayers at Gaakwen and two other stops on this stretch.

traffic, and also celebrated their virtuosic ability to command the road's various risks as evidence of their "entrepreneurial" skill. On the other, they also recognized the limits to their powers. Indeed, more than perhaps anyone else, the drivers and dealers engaged in Gaakwen's illicit cargo trades witnessed firsthand the devastating realities of road hazard, including death, destruction, and ruined hopes. This awareness was palpable in many of the metaphors of the trade: for instance, brokers called a truck that had escaped its driver's control a *mnyama*, a "beast." Unleashed from its gears, a truck leaves the realm of human and technological agency and enters that of the wilderness.¹⁷⁸ In the alternative economies of the truck stop, then, accident becomes intention, but machine also threatens to become beast.

In what follows, I examine how Gaakwen's traders "played with loss" in ways that made visible some of the contradictions of Kenyan economic ideology. On the one hand, traders' engagements with road hazard revealed the multiple and contradictory ways in which "risk" was deployed within a liberalized economy: even as a discourse of entrepreneurialism celebrated the "self-made man," who was willing to take risks and to circulate money in the expectation of a return, road users were surveilled and criticized for their supposed penchant for (bad) risk: driving too fast, casual sex, alcohol. Because Gaakwen's entrepreneurial risk sometimes took the form of an accident, these frameworks were juxtaposed in especially direct ways. On the other hand, risk discourses did not exhaust Gaakwen traders' engagement with contingency, loss, and profit. This was visible in multiple ways: within a sense that "true" contingency did live outside of the risk framework; in an anxiety that hazard could overwhelm the calculative frameworks of

¹⁷⁸ The *mnyama* stands in opposition both to the technology and to the human driver. The metaphor is extended in other animalistic descriptions of trucks behaving badly. A near miss—when trucks come close enough to one another that their side mirrors come into contact—is called "kulambana," to lick one another. The side mirrors are also called "masikio," ears.

risk to become “wild;” and in an attention to the way that contingency could also turn commodities into something like gifts.

In the next section, “salvage,” I explore the moralities created by the regular occurrence of accidents in Gaakwen. In making commodities available to roadside populations, frequent accidents have given rise to frameworks for explaining and expressing how one might be legitimately allowed to take these things. These rest on an understanding of the accident as a truly contingent moment when the market is overwhelmed and goods are decommodified. In the following section, “Intentional Accidents,” I explore how these “innocent” frameworks are troubled by the intentionality of “intentional accidents,” and argue that drivers respond to this moral ambiguity by framing their profit as a product of “productive risk” rather than of pure contingency. The final section, “leakage” revisits the question of risk and of remainder, showing how drivers define the fuel they sell as a “leftover” that is produced by skilled driving, how dealers construct their profits as a “marginal” fraction, and how trucking companies see this as a “leakage” they need to stem. These different approaches to the appropriated share reveals a form of calculation that is actively decentered, and which makes the differentially-produced margin the terrain of both valuation and contestation.

II. SALVAGE

“Risk began with the extension of commerce over space,” writes Jonathan Levy. As merchant capitalism expanded and new trade routes were forged across oceans, the hazards of trade also increased. Brokers seeking to participate in the economy of long-distance trade began

to offer “risques” to mitigate the hazards of shipping—for a fee, they would assume the obligation to compensate merchants for cargo lost at sea. When it emerged in the 1700s, then, “risk” didn’t describe hazard itself, but rather its insurance—risques were mechanisms for mitigating financial losses. “Risk” was the form in which “peril” was commodified. Over time, buyers of risk formulated increasingly specific definitions of what kinds of loss they would compensate and what kinds of unfortunate events leading to losses could be termed an “accident.” Gathered under the rubric “acts of God” (even once secularized), they defined “accidents” as events that occurred beyond human agency. The accident was a *force majeure*, something outside human capacity to foresee or prevent it. Losses occurring through carelessness or imprudence were not accidents; “true” contingency was required to establish the right to compensation (Levy 2012:37–40). Thus the expansion of risk decisively affected the meaning of the accident and, in turn, of responsibility and agency.¹⁷⁹

Risque sellers themselves were initially bound to the idea that in order for profit to be moral, it must be backed by “true” contingency. These moral logics seem counterintuitive today. In Lorraine Daston’s (1995) telling, risk brokers in early 18th century England were reluctant to use a new economic tool—probability—to calculate their rates because (in order to avoid accusations of usury) future-oriented contracts like insurance and gambling had to contain a substantial element of uncertainty. Knowing probability put insurance brokers on unstable moral ground, much as knowing in advance the outcome of a roll of the dice would for a gambler. Yet by the 19th Century, probability-based insurance had taken on a sense of necessity and

¹⁷⁹ In *The Wheels of Commerce* Braudel explains how long distance trade increased profits: “The indisputable superiority of Fernhandel, long-distance trading, lay in the concentration it made possible, which meant it was an unrivalled machine for the rapid reproduction and increase of capital. In short, one is forced to agree with the German historians and with Maurice Dobb, who see long-distance trade as an essential factor in the creation of merchant capitalism, and in the creation of the merchant bourgeoisie” (Braudel 1982:348).

naturalness, while gambling went the opposite direction. Emerging class sensibilities placed moral value on the forward looking, family oriented, calculating individual. This shift in the moral valence of probabilistic calculation has had long-term effects. Risk-takers are now expected to manage their risks—to calculate them appropriately, to buy insurance. And with the rise of risk, the meaning of accident also shifted: by the late twentieth century they were no longer the truly unpredictable event, nor even an agentless effect of technology, instead they are that which should have been prevented. “Accidents have become very specifically constructed as preventable events which should not ever, in an ideal world, have happened” (Luckin and Cooter 1997:51).

Shipwrecks

These shifting meanings of risk and accident lay the groundwork for some of the epistemic concepts I explore in this chapter. But, importantly, the story of risk does not exhaust the meanings of long-distance exchange and the concepts it generated in the face of contingency and loss. Indeed, while “risques” compensated financially for loss, they did not reduce the actual occurrence of hazardous events like shipwrecks. Wrecks are, so to speak, the other side of risk—the “real” hazard which risk insures. More, considering peril and loss from the perspective of the shipwreck rather than from the perspective of risk offers a slightly different view on the relationship between value, loss, and agency. For one thing, in the wreck, unlike in the “risque” calculation, that which is lost can also be *found*. In literature of the merchant era, shipwrecks served as metaphors for the uncertainty of existence, but they also offered opportunities to consider the re-appearance (in altered form) of things and persons thought to be lost (Morrison

2014; Thompson 2014). Relatives return. Remains of wrecks reappear, washed up on shore or found floating. One person's wreck can become another person's bounty. Whereas trading in "risques" exemplifies the emergent processes of abstraction that would come to characterize capitalist modernity, then, the representation of shipwrecks reminds us of that which cannot entirely be captured by risk calculation.

So while shipping generated conceptual frameworks for understanding and managing loss financially (in the form of risk), it *also* generated frameworks for establishing the circumstances under which lost property could be appropriated by a new owner.¹⁸⁰ These were expressed through legal and cultural definitions of what those things were in the first place. Scholars interested in shipwreck salvage have commented on the ways that recovered items were conceptually worked over, so as to become available for the taking. In an article on how items found at sea were legally assessed in medieval England, Tom Johnson describes the techniques used to first establish a "find" as ownerless, and then to re-inscribe it into regimes of property and value. Through techniques of naming and valuation, he writes, the salvaged items are gradually dislodged from their (unknown) original owners and rewritten as the property of a new owner. A certain delicacy was needed in describing the act of finding itself; it had to be done in such a way that the finder could claim the items without attacking the claim of the original owner, should this person reappear. Johnson discusses the Latin verb "*invenio*," which was used to describe the "finding" or "happening upon" of things that have become separated from their original owners. *Invenio* implies some agency in the object itself, as well as the accidental nature of the find. "Wrecks were not calculatingly taken, but innocently found. The verb *invenio*, then,

¹⁸⁰ The fact that risk has received far more attention as a conceptual byproduct of the shipping trade than any of these salvage-related concepts may be related to its current global dominance as an economic technology.

emerges as an artful sleight of legal discourse, carefully associating, but never totally entangling, a wreck with its finder” (Johnson 2015). Contingency is essential to establishing this “innocence”—it distinguishes the appropriation of those who “come upon” from those who “seize.” Just as the wreck must be accidental in order to qualify for risk-compensation, so must the finding of its remainders be truly accidental in order to avoid suspicion of theft.

Jatin Dua foregrounds similar questions in his discussion of shipwreck finds in the Indian Ocean. He describes a 19th-century struggle between British legal attempts to adjudicate ocean finds as either “flotsam” and “jetsam” (and thereby to establish some as available for taking and some not¹⁸¹), which British authorities used to contest the claims of coastal populations who viewed salvage as a “gift from the sea.” Dua writes, “Flotsam and jetsam, gift and theft are not mere descriptors but projects and end results of legal and ethical arguments” (Dua 2017). Each of these concepts seeks to delineate the precise nature of the moment of acquisition—was it accidental or was it planned?—in order to assert (or contest) a claim. As with *invenio*, contingency is important in these finds, because the question of what constitutes “salvage,” and who has a right to it, is also haunted by the possibility of slipping into another moral frame. If the taking is intentional, the gift could be redefined as theft (or piracy); it could fall into the realm of “scavenging.” The less “accidental” the find seems, the more difficult it is to establish its legitimacy, and the more essential the work of framing and defining that establishes what is a legitimate taking and what an illegitimate one. When wrecks are so common as to generate an established economy around them—as in what Dua calls “shipwreck villages” and as in

¹⁸¹ In the case of “jetsam,” cargo that has been intentionally offloaded (jettisoned) by a ship, the owner is considered to have relinquished their claim and the finder may therefore claim it. “Flotsam”—cargo found floating—is more ambiguous, and the original owner may still have their claim.

Gaakwen—this work is doubly important. In Gaakwen, this work of legitimation took place through moral and cultural efforts that sought to distinguish accident from crime.

Truckwrecks

One night around midnight I was sitting in a Gaakwen eatery with Tony, a local mechanic who also works informally in accident rescue. We were discussing a passenger van accident that had happened earlier that day on the outskirts of the township. John came in and sat with us. A former soldier who was the son of wealthy landowners near Gaakwen, John now lives in a tent constructed from road scraps he had salvaged (car seats, cushions, scrap metal, fabric). Tony and John had known each other in former lives in Nairobi, and both had ended up in Gaakwen through twists of historical fate and personal misfortune. Gaakwen hosted many people like this—people fallen on hard times, or even with mental and physical disabilities and addictions. They found a kind of refuge in the truck stop’s relative freedom from social sanction and in the opportunities offered by its service economy.

My conversation with Tony and John that night turned toward Gaakwen’s “alternative” trades. It was John who introduced the topic, by shyly showing us what he was carrying in a black plastic bag—a red sweater, which he told us he had salvaged from the crash scene earlier, only slightly stained with blood. Most things had already been taken by the time he arrived, he said, by “those boys”—he gestured at Tony, but was referring more generally to the young men

often described in Gaakwen as “brokers.”¹⁸² Despite his fondness for Tony, John mentioned brokers with some disdain, implying that these were people who did not comply with his own moral calculus around how one should behave at a crash site. John was insistent, for instance, that one should never take food or produce from a site, contrasting “cultural” goods (“*vitu vya mila*”) like farm products against alienated commodities like money to argue that money was fair game while food was not. Tony, in contrast, argued that produce was of little value and would go to waste if not claimed. For him, it was money which posed a thornier problem, because even if the owner of the money was dead, debts were transferrable.¹⁸³ Furthermore, the important question was not what one took but *how*—it was wrong to take from someone who was alive and could see you, Tony said. Taking from someone alive, or taking items which could impose a debt on succeeding family members, risked exposing the taker to a curse. The moment of a crash, it seemed, allowed for a realignment of ownership—but it was not a free-for-all; indeed, the moral accounting around what was “take-able” seemed unsettled.

¹⁸² In Kenya the word “broker” is used to refer to many different occupations, though it always describes a middle man of some kind, someone who mediates access to an opaque market. In chapter 4 I discussed the longer history of agricultural brokers, but in contemporary Gaakwen, brokers, *mabroker*; describes the men who earn a living by attending carefully to the happenings of the highway—and especially to its interruptions. These brokers facilitate a range of transactions in Gaakwen, but are most particularly associated with accident salvage activities and negotiating deals for truckers who want to sell something on the side. Like the brokers that have long appeared in anthropological literature, they are attuned to the opportunities for personal gain that emerge at the interface of different regimes of accumulation and authority; and as liminal figures, they are also endowed with a certain moral ambiguity (James 2011).

¹⁸³ John argued that cultural goods are linked with moral values in such a way that, if taken, they could connect the taker to the spirit of the crash victim and lead to being haunted. Tony disputed this by saying that food would simply spoil if left on the side of the road, and pointed to several examples in someone who stole cash had been haunted by the spirit of the victim. This opened a side debate over what it meant to steal money from a dead person, and whether money was culturally coded in ways that would allow it to mediate a haunting. The determination seemed to be yes, but particularly so if money left a debt behind. Since debt was transferrable to other family members, taking that money was not just a selfish but a harmful act, and could lead to being haunted. It was interesting to observe that different dichotomies were at work in structuring the morality of this occupation: on the one hand, a dichotomy of waste and value; on the other, a dichotomy of “cultural” goods versus “alienated” commodities. (See also a fascinating discussion around “moral obtaining” and surplus in (Cherkaev 2017).

In addition to talking about the smaller accidents that regularly took place in Gaakwen, Tony and John also discussed salvage from larger tractor-trailer accidents and their cargo. Here, the moral calculus was slightly different and somewhat less fraught because the “owner” of the property was not the person injured in the accident but a company, usually far away. Nevertheless, and despite the fact that truck drivers often survive such accidents, cargo salvage was also tinged with the moral ambiguity of its association with death and destruction. In this conversation, the discussion of cargo appropriation was filtered through Tony and John’s memories of the Sachangwan tragedy, in which scores of people collecting fuel from an overturned diesel tanker had died when the fuel caught on fire (I discuss this accident at length in the Preface). Both had been in Gaakwen that day, and recalled how the police had organized those thronging the scene into a queue, so that each paid one hundred shillings (\$1) to fill a jerry can—an aspect of the story that appears nowhere in the media coverage. They also remembered the devastation of the fire, a blue flame they had never seen before; the smell of human flesh that had lingered on the highway for weeks after the event; and the hard work of the aftermath, scraping melted metal off the highway and collecting what remained of people’s bodies. According to these two, the fire had been caused by the greed of one “salvager,” who came in a pickup with 100-liter containers (instead of the normal 20-liter jerry cans) and got into a fight with the police when they wouldn’t allow him to fill them. This man, the story went, dropped a match on the fuel in his anger.

Despite these dark memories, there was a certain lightheartedness in much of their discussion of accident cargo—they reminisced, for instance, about a day when salvagers rushing to the scene of an accident had discovered the cargo was huge snakes, and found themselves

catching snakes on the highway (luckily, the snakes had been drugged) instead of making away with property. Or, another day when a truck carrying a load of fresh fish crashed. Because few people had refrigeration capacity, the fish had to be eaten immediately: that night, they said, Gaakwen was drenched in the smell of frying fish. No one made money, but the whole town ate well. In this conversation, a wide range of verbs were used to describe the act of picking items up off the highway: “kuvuna” (to reap/harvest); “kufagia” (to sweep); “kuchota” (to pour/fill a container with a liquid); “kuporapora” (to pilfer); “kufunika” (to cover/to claim); “kusanya” (to gather). Most of these verbs, describing the taking primarily in terms of the physical action linked to the material qualities of the item, normalized the action of taking by limiting its meaning to the *activity* of appropriation. Moreover, several of the verbs come from the vocabulary of agricultural work, expressing a link to agrarian life which was vividly present throughout this conversation.



Gleaning. *Left.* Jean François Millet, The Gleaners, 1857. *Right.* Wananchi “gleaning” from a crash site, 2017. In her discussion of gleaning in “The Gleaners and I,” Agnes Varda notes the physical action of stooping to pick something up that is associated with agricultural gleaning. As Tony’s comments make clear, these physical actions have an important role in defining the meaning of what is being done.

Only the verb “*kuporapora*” (to pilfer) contained a reference to the moral status of the taking. *Kuporapora* comes from “*kupora*” (to steal), though expressing theft in a manner less

harsh than the more common verb for “to steal”—*kuiba*. By repeating the “pora” twice, its impact is further lessened. But for Tony, the verb contained only a very slender link to theft. When I asked about the difference between “*kupora*” and “*kuiba*” (to steal), he said “you are ‘stealing’ if you go somewhere, break in, steal, take... but when there’s a crash, you ‘pilfer,’ that is, *you can pretend you just found it.*”¹⁸⁴ Tony used this verb as part of a description of how formal accident recovery crews tried to protect the crash site against those who would raid it. He said that the men who operated accident recovery businesses (those who owned tow trucks and machinery for hauling tractor trailers off the roadside) had relationships with Gaakwen-based brokers who let them know when a crash had happened, so that they could arrive quickly, and who then helped them with the salvage work. They didn’t work with just anyone, he said, because many people only wanted to access the crash site for the purpose of pilfering. Only in ventriloquizing the discourse of the accident recovery did the verb of theft creep into Tony’s speech, and even then he sought to contain its negative judgment. When he described those who are hired to help with the salvage and still take some “scraps” home (as Tony did himself) he instead used the verb “*kufunika*,” to cover, implying that you hide a little something to take with you.

Tony and John’s stories resonated with others I had heard at various stops along the trade route, which also presented accidents as an innocent opportunity for roadside populations to access cargo. Sheila, a friend who lived near a bad stretch of highway in western Kenya, loved telling stories about “transists” (trailers) that had crashed, and the afterlives of their cargo. Like John and Tony, she did not see anything wrong in the taking of commodities; such opportunities

¹⁸⁴ “Umeenda kuiba vitu pahali, umevunja mahali, umeiba, umechukua. ... Gari ikianguka, unapora, yaani, unaweza ukajifanya umepata tu.”

were a fact of life along the trade route. She told me, for instance, that plastic sandals and sneakers were so attractive to roadside crowds that the companies started transporting loads with only one half of a pair—left or right—to make them less vulnerable to pilferage, but people still took them. She described how the local market price for whatever crash commodity was flooding the market would dip temporarily until the goods were absorbed, distributed into the rural hinterland or sent elsewhere. The fact that the commodities lost their value (because their sudden abundance undid the market and thus decommodified the goods) painted a picture of need satisfaction that erased a sense that someone was making a profit off these goods. In these stories, accidents were presented almost as a kind of redistributive gift. In a rural landscape where many commodities were unaffordable luxuries, the site of a crash became a scene of plenitude.

Sheila's implicit argument that crashes could be seen as something like redistribution is mirrored in the word that is usually used to describe the crowds who gather around crashes: "*wananchi*." Translated literally as "people of the country," the use of "*wananchi*" (sing: *mwananchi*) often oscillates between two meanings, describing both "the people" as those who claim the popular rights of the mass, and "the crowd" in the sense of an undifferentiated mob. Using the term *wananchi* positions the crowd as the rightful subject of redistribution, while also displacing an individual intention. In this way, salvage was doubly redefined: first, as that which was innocently found—as a gift; second, as a kind of redistribution, a means of moving goods from the more fortunate to the less fortunate.

But as I have been arguing, it was important that the find be distinguished from the work of intentional theft, in order for roadside populations to construct their taking as the rightful

claim of the poor on the road's leftover gifts. "Salvage" constructs a concept of legitimate appropriation that derives from contingency, and from a sense that the commodities now exist *outside* an established exchange framework.¹⁸⁵ To call something salvage is to describe what is taken as a remainder—a bit of value that has escaped from dominant regimes of property or circulation. As Derrida puts it, "the remainder *is* not, it is not a being, not a modification of that which is" (cf. Miller 2007). The concept establishes a claim to take, but in a way that does not challenge the rights of the original owner. So both the framing as remainder and the gesture toward contingency simultaneously permit and limit the scope of the transaction. But even while allowing bits of value to "escape," salvage also preserves hierarchies around who has rights to remainder and who to surplus.

The framework within which road goods were "salvage" was not stable, however. Much like claiming that a commodity "fell off the truck," the claim to contingency which is made to dispel the idea of theft can sometimes slide into a different framework. In Gaakwen, the claim on contingency was destabilized by two possibilities: first, that the accident might in fact have been "intentional," which I will explore in the next section, and second, that in the rush to enjoy spilled commodities roadside populations might become inured to the death and destruction that was also a part of the crash. A tone of moral condemnation appears in lighthearted salvage stories when tellers are describing events in which those mobbing an accident had neglected the injured in order to focus on taking goods. Sheila told me about a crash when a driver was trapped in the cab of his truck, while the crowd ignored him. In Gaakwen, a mechanic friend told me that

¹⁸⁵ The role of contingency and remainder in constructing a right to take also resembled gleaning, an ancient agricultural practice in which the rural poor were allowed to enter a landowner's field after the harvest and gather anything left behind. This practice is mandated in the Bible (Leviticus and Deuteronomy) in such a way that landowners were commanded to (accidentally) leave something behind: one might call these intentional remainders.

those gathering goods will even ignore screams from crash victims, thinking there is nothing they can do and if they try to help they will lose their chance to glean. I encountered similar stories in other parts of Kenya—in Shimalabandu, I heard about an accident in which two young men from the village were so busy gathering goods and money from the crash site that they failed to notice their mother had been one of the passengers and was lying injured in the road. The radical disintegration of a social contract was mobilized here through a moment in which the mother-child bond was ruptured. Greed not only turns the crowd into a mob, then, it turns “the people” into selfish individuals.

The next section will explore further the ambivalence of “intention” in describing the crashes known as “intentional accidents.” I argue, first, that dealers and drivers engaged in “intentional” diversions nevertheless draw on certain frameworks resembling those provided by salvage: particularly an insistence that what they take is leftover, or at least marginal—the commodities taken are redefined in such a way as to not directly contest an owners’ claim. At the same time, in drivers’ and dealers’ justifications of their appropriation, one can trace a shift from emphasizing the *contingency* of the find to emphasizing their successful management of entrepreneurial *risk*.

III. INTENTIONAL ACCIDENTS

When John made a reference to the appearance of “brokers” at the crash site, he revealed a crucial aspect of “salvage” in Gaakwen. Gaakwen is known for networks of brokers who mediate the diversion of commodities into the hinterland. And because this “intentional”

diversion of commodities sometimes took the form of a (planned) accident, it was not always clearly distinguished from the salvage activities that take place around unplanned accidents. Indeed, as I point out above, unplanned accidents happened frequently enough in the area to have generated an established economy in accident-related services—and the same people were often involved with both “real” and “intentional” accidents. Brokers engaged in a wide varieties of activities in Gaakwen, ranging from accident rescue and salvage to negotiating deals for truckers who want to sell something on the side. They often sought to align “intentional” accidents with “real” ones, in order to legitimate their takings as a form of “salvage.” Despite efforts to maintain a distinction between “intentional” and “contingent” diversions, then, the way that crashes shaped the life of Gaakwen made it difficult to draw a strong line between them. More, in the potential intentionality of the accident, intentional crashes introduced uncertainty into the concept of “accident” itself, and thus troubled the epistemic frameworks that legitimized the roadside appropriation of property.

Intriguingly, the erasure of accident also dovetailed with road safety discourses that sought to construct all road crashes as “predictable and preventable” and to criminalize drivers. For the taking of property not to be a theft, it had to be an accident. But in Gaakwen, the accident was overdetermined—it was itself the sign of an intention. Thus the construction of “accident” and “intention” in Gaakwen were quite complex. One effect of this was that both drivers and dealers had to do substantial work to establish their activities as legitimate, including conceptual work on the concept of contingency itself. Part of this work, as I will show, involved an appropriation of frameworks derived from risk.

Because the trade in accident goods involved cargo theft, often with police collusion, writing about it poses methodological and ethical challenges. In what follows, I rely on conversations I had personally, as well as four in-depth interviews conducted on my behalf by a friend and Gaakwen resident. These interviews were with brokers and truckers who preferred not to be seen talking to me. The characters presented here are composites. Despite these precautions, much of what I present here is, at least in Gaakwen, common knowledge.

Before discussing drivers' and brokers' approaches to their work, I should first describe what "intentional accident" meant to Gaakwen residents more generally. As I've noted, the practice emerged in the context of the "real" tractor-trailer accidents that frequently took place along the trade route, and which often supplied goods to roadside populations. Thus, in Gaakwen, "accident" was a matter of degree: there were many shades of intentionality and agency. My conversations about crashes often featured a kind of lay forensics, as my interlocutors deliberated on the traces of an event, seeking clues as to its cause. The basic distinction was between accidents in which the driver purposefully overturned the truck in order to sell some cargo or to cover up the fact that it had previously been sold, and those that the driver did not intend to cause. (Make no mistake: in these latter cases, someone was still to blame—drivers for freewheeling or ignoring potential mechanical faults; companies for skimping on services and checks. But it was accepted that the moment of the accident was not chosen.)

Take, for example, an accident that happened in 2015. A lorry carrying pharmaceuticals bound for Uganda had crashed in the middle of the truckstop. I arrived in Gaakwen just a few

days after the event, when tales of the crash were still fresh. The story going around Gaakwen was that the lorry had been crashed on purpose—residents claimed that the truck had been going too slowly when it entered town to have been experiencing the kind of uncontrolled descent that would normally cause someone to crash. Instead, it simply went into a ditch and overturned.¹⁸⁶ The driver fled. Residents said the cargo disappeared immediately, and, soon after, investigators arrived in town trying to find it. They posed as potential buyers of the medicine and arrested people who agreed to sell to them. The fact that investigators arrived so quickly, and were so persistent, suggested to Gaakwen residents that this was cargo owned by some important person: several people told me that it belonged to Yoweri Museveni, the Ugandan president.

For intentional accidents, then, decisions as to the degree and *kind* of intention were influenced by the substance of the cargo as well as the size of the networks that seemed to be involved.¹⁸⁷ An employee of a security and truck tracking company told me that certain commodities were particularly risky to transport, whether because their form makes them easy to pilfer from a truck or “salvage” from the scene of an accident, or because they were easy to sell on again. He described these as “hotcakes.” Popular food items like packaged bread, sugar, biscuits, rice, flour, were the hottest of hotcakes: light, readily consumable and packaged to go. Everyday personal and household items were also popular with raiders because they were easy to transport and had a consistent market, and because their homogeneity made them difficult for

¹⁸⁶ The ditches by the side of many Kenyan roads, even the main highways, facilitate intentional crashes, as well as providing a somewhat hidden place for brokers to take cargo.

¹⁸⁷ There were some accidents that seemed, to Gaakwen’s detective eyes, to be a part of something that went far beyond Gaakwen’s own brokers. At one point, a truck full of electronics crashed on the hill, and the cargo was taken. Gaakwen residents admitted that the goods had been stored “in a house” in Gaakwen, but they nevertheless believed this to be the work of a network that was not based in the township. As a friend told me, this was not “a Gaakwen crime.” The fact that the people who took the cargo had been wearing military uniforms and carrying rifles suggested the involvement of “highers-up,” because weapons and uniforms are tightly controlled. Ultimately, a senior military official was arrested for the theft.

investigators to detect and retrieve. The fact that they could easily be divided into smaller fractions also helped these commodities quickly dissolve into local retail and household economies. High value commodities like coffee, fish maws,¹⁸⁸ and fuel, he said, were also attractive, though riskier to steal because of their higher value. In contrast, raw materials, like clinker for cement or unprocessed tea leaves, were difficult to collect, cumbersome to ferry, and difficult to trade on the black market because they rely on specialized processing facilities. Sometimes it was surprising what could be a “hotcake.” I once heard of a molasses truck that was crashed for the purpose of sale and wondered that such a commodity had been marked. But when I visited the crash site a few days later, with the slightly alcoholic smell of molasses still in the air, I suddenly realized its value as liquor-in-the-making.

As these forensic assessments reveal, Gaakwen worked well as a site for diverting commodities for two reasons. The first is that authorities perceived it to be a site where roadside populations were primed to rapidly seize goods and distribute them into the rural “hinterland.” Because this rural space was opaque to authority, and rural populations were viewed as intractable and possibly dangerous, investigators would rarely try to trace goods unless they were particularly high in value. The second was that in fact there *were* established networks in place for selling goods. In fact, the moral argument made by Sheila, John, and Tony, in which “real” accidents decommodify cargo that is salvaged by flooding the market, did not align with the reality of Gaakwen’s crashes. A trade in salvaged goods was well established in and around Gaakwen. An accident goods broker told me that when shopkeepers and merchants from nearby towns heard of a large crash, they would quickly come to the scene to buy goods at a low price.

¹⁸⁸ These are extremely valuable byproducts of the fishing trade on Lake Victoria. Also known as “swim bladders,” they are used to make surgical thread and anesthetics.

Not only brokers but anyone who was in the right place at the right moment could profit from the crash.

Brokers involved in accident commodities defined their particular skill as making *sure* that contingency worked in their favor. They boasted of their ability to reach the scene of a crash quickly, and to consistently find a market for goods—so that they were sold quickly enough to avoid attracting authorities’ attention, while also making sufficient profit to justify the risk of arrest (or worse). Brokers also claimed to be able to handle commodities that might be too risky for the average mwananchi—like pharmaceuticals. Thus, their skill in knowing local markets ensured that the trajectory of the cargo coincided with the circulations of the marginal economy. Even while brokers sought to merge with wananchi when claiming the right to appropriate goods, then, the bulk of their claim to legitimate appropriation lay in their entrepreneurial attitude and virtuosic command of contingency.

Road Entrepreneurs

Accident goods brokerage makes especially visible the way that entrepreneurial risk overlaps with life-or-death hazard in the roadside economy. In describing their work, brokers moved back and forth between the subject positions of “*mwananchi*” and “entrepreneur,” aligning themselves with the “deserving poor” at some moments while celebrating their prowess as businessmen and entrepreneurs at others. Deborah James notes something similar in describing the land brokers who re-emerged in South Africa in the context of land redistribution. Brokers, she writes, are bricoleurs who construct identities and moralities from multiple sources: “they blend together egalitarianism and rights-based concerns with the hierarchical political

authority of traditional leaders and patriarchs, while simultaneously foregrounding the economic individualism and choice orientation associated with neoliberalism” (James 2011).

Gaakwen’s brokers aligned themselves with wananchi, the “people” (or the crowd), both when they described how they make goods disappear and when they explain their right to trade in them. Brokers cast themselves as unfortunates, forced to put their bodies and freedom on the line in order to glean a small profit. But they also sought to merge with the roadside crowd as a kind of camouflage. As one broker explained, the fact that wananchi reliably gather at the scene of the crash allows the disappearance of goods to be blamed on the “unruly crowd,” and discouraged investigators from seeking out individuals.

More forcefully, brokers distinguished themselves from wananchi in their entrepreneurial approach to contingency, in particular their use of capital and knowledge to manage risk and to successfully engage in arbitrage. In the case of unplanned crashes, access to cash allowed brokers to make use of contingency by helping them manipulate temporality. On the one hand, it granted them time to store goods and wait until prices rise again. “We know the ‘right’ prices of goods,” one broker said, arguing that he could wait to sell goods until the moment of glut had passed. This was the source of their profit (“*faida*”). According to this broker, it was capital and knowledge that allowed him to make the most of contingency, whereas the “crowd” had to sell at whatever price they were able to get. On the other hand, access to capital allowed brokers to

maintain networks that helped them sell goods quickly when necessary (goods for export, one said, must be sold on immediately).¹⁸⁹

Pre-arranged crashes, meanwhile, were both less contingent and more risky. These involved paying police to look the other way and having a ready market so that profit can be made and all the relevant parties paid off quickly. Temporality was again important, because the transaction needed to be completed as quickly as possible. The number of people in the know made delays dangerous—if the driver was caught, he could try to displace responsibility by naming the broker; police could get impatient if they were not paid off.

Two kinds of risk come together in these stories: the likelihood of an accident occurring and the entrepreneurial risk that brokers assume by obtaining commodities they then have to sell. In boasting of their success in arbitrage, and their ability to manipulate contingency, brokers established themselves as entrepreneurs. Indeed, it is the *intentionality* rather than the *innocence* of their profit which underpins their claim to it. Rather than drawing on the language of contingency to claim an innocent finding, they crafted a “heroic ethics” of risk-taking (Bear 2015:26). As Caitlin Zaloom argues, celebrating risk is a feature of subjectivity under market conditions, when risk-taking becomes a source of self-determination: “Traders proudly identify with their role as risk takers. They describe absorbing risk as their job...” (Zaloom 2004:377).

¹⁸⁹ Goods for “export” can’t stay in their possession for long because they are too dangerous. Kenyan tax authorities are particularly anxious about the diversion of export goods (that is, goods which are either produced in Kenya or which arrive in the Kenyan port of Mombasa bound for other East African countries). This anxiety springs from two sources. Goods bound for Ugandan import are not taxed at the port, when they arrive in Mombasa but rather at the Ugandan border, by the Ugandan government. (Though this is changing.) When these goods are “diverted” into the “local market,” as the Kenya Revenue Authority describes it, local markets are essentially trading in untaxed goods. Furthermore, Kenya is engaged in ongoing competition with Tanzania about which port will be favored. The Tanzanian case has recently been strengthened by negotiations with the Ugandan government about the route of a new pipeline from Uganda’s oil-producing areas. If it goes to the Ugandan port, Kenya will miss out on the traffic entirely. With a reputation already tarnished by allegations of corruption in the port, bribe-seeking road police, and accident-ridden roads, the idea that transit goods are subject to banditry could be decisive. The Tanzanian case has recently been strengthened by successful negotiations with the Ugandan government about the route of a new pipeline from Uganda’s oil-producing areas. These geopolitical contests, as elsewhere in the world, have implications for infrastructural viability and economic impact on the entire trade route.

At the same time, brokers found this exhausting. The brokers I heard from were not as triumphant as Zaloom's traders. One broker said he was ready to leave the job because it was increasingly difficult to make a profit, now that everyone knew "the right price" of goods.

These days I'm tired, everyone has gotten clever—police, government, courts, bosses and drivers—they know the price of the things we want and profit isn't what it used to be. I think I should try another kind of business. In this one you sleep with your heart in your hand.¹⁹⁰

Kaa Chonjo

Brokers' risk exposure is different from that of drivers, who don't bear the primary financial risk but do risk both their freedom and even their lives. The work biography of one driver, nicknamed "Chonjo," will illustrate some of the ways that drivers engage with risk. His nickname, which meant something like "alert to opportunity," was earned from stories about his various exploits in "side" dealings in which he sold cargo or transported surplus loads to earn a bit of extra income beyond his salary. In fact, Chonjo recounted his employment history as a story of the supplementary income he was able to earn—this extra was more significant than his wage. At one point he described leaving a company because he didn't get enough opportunities to put his truck to entrepreneurial use. This reflected a sense I had that drivers' approaches to risk and profit, unlike that of brokers, were constructed in opposition to their employers and to their positions as employees. More, because drivers are particular targets of health and safety campaigns, they are constructed as risk-bearing subjects *both* by financial ideologies promoting entrepreneurial risk and by campaigns promoting risk reduction on the road. These intersected in

¹⁹⁰ "Siku hizi nimechoka sana, kila mtu ameerevuka si asikari, ni serikali, si mahakama, si matajiri na madereva wanajua bei ya kile tunataka sasa faida si kama zamani. Naona nifanye biashara nyingine, hii bwana unalala na roho mkononi."

complex ways for many drivers I spoke with, often causing them to perceive safety regulations as restrictions.

This is illustrated by Chonjo's nickname. "*Kaa chonjo*," which translates as "stay alert," or even "beware," is a term often used in both HIV awareness and road safety campaigns to tell drivers to use condoms or drive slowly, or, more generally, to manage their risk.¹⁹¹ The phrase is adopted into risk discourse from slang, *kaa chonjo* being a way to warn someone to watch out. In the words of one song about the dangers of Nairobi, "*kaa chonjo, ama utauzwa*"—"stay alert or you'll be eaten alive."¹⁹² In the narrative of the big city full of rapacious hustlers, *kaa chonjo* means both to be alert to opportunity *and* to beware of those who are on the lookout for opportunity. The phrase is particularly present for truck drivers because they are the main targets of both road safety and HIV awareness campaigns. Chonjo's name is an ironic repurposing of the meaning of "chonjo"—his engagement with risk is not that of the driver who drives carefully, but rather that of the opportunistic entrepreneur.

Chonjo's first source of "extra" came from a side business transporting bodies. He would stow them on top of his cargo and thus turn his truck into a hearse of sorts. The job relied on the felicitous overlap of routes: both cargo and corpses tend to move westward.¹⁹³ Chonjo recounted the story of the time his turnboy—who wasn't aware of the extra cargo—accidentally happened upon a body and, scandalized, called the truck's owner to report his finding. Chonjo persuaded

¹⁹¹ It is also used as the Kenyan equivalent of "if you see something, say something" in anti-terror campaigns.

¹⁹² Escobar, "Kaa Chonjo." Literally, the line means, "Stay alert or you'll be sold." The sucker who doesn't remain alert, *kaa chonjo* suggests, deserves to be taught a lesson.

¹⁹³ As I discuss in Chapter 5, western Kenya is known as the region whose dominant ethnic groups are most attached to bringing bodies home for burial. These groups are often mocked by other ethnic groups in Kenya for the amount of money they spend ("waste") in doing so. Smuggling bodies on the back of a lorry was much cheaper than the "proper" way to take a body home for burial, which requires a permit and often renting a vehicle that can carry a whole escorting party. (I heard many stories of unorthodox body transport—a friend once told me the story of a family who packed the body of a child into a suitcase and sent it by bus; the suitcase was stolen out of the bus cargo carrier, and they never recovered it. Many buses explicitly state "no bodies" in their luggage and package rules.)

the owner that he was doing a service according to Islamic law. Chonjo told him that a hearse had broken down and members of the funeral cortege had asked him to “cover the corpse”—to take it somewhere safe until they could resolve their mechanical problems.¹⁹⁴ In stories like these, Chonjo explained how he earned his reputation as an intrepid wheeler and dealer.

He tired of this business, but perhaps because of his reputation was later persuaded by “some people” to sell off a truckload of sugar. He said they offered him an amount he couldn’t refuse; an amount significant enough that he could sacrifice his job for it. He delivered the sugar to a barracks instead of to its proper destination, abandoned the truck by the side of the road, and “disappeared into the trees.” The fact that he hadn’t crashed the vehicle, he said, placated the owner enough that he didn’t chase him for prosecution, since insurance paid for the cargo. In fact, this owner even hired him back later, as there was no real evidence that Chonjo had been responsible for the event. Though part of the money he received in the transaction was counterfeit, there was enough that he was able to spend a year building a house for his family on the coast before he went back to look for another job. Upon being asked how he could do this to an owner who trusted him, he replied:

It’s true he trusted me but everyone is looking for money, don’t you want money? If I hadn’t sold that sugar I wouldn’t have gotten a million and more in cash. And he hurts us, so we hurt him. *Who you think is, isn’t—*isn’t that right?¹⁹⁵

Though the story worked out relatively well for Chonjo, his narrative nevertheless reveals the contentious nature of labor arrangements between drivers and their employers. The increase in

¹⁹⁴ As I discuss in Chapter Four, many trucking companies are based on the coast and are marked as Muslim—many drivers are as well, and one of Gaakwen’s prominent features is its mosque (built by and with an imam salaried by one of the trucking companies, Anwar Ali). In the midst of a predominantly Christian region, and one that is not particularly cosmopolitan, Gaakwen is notable for the many ways in which it is marked as a Muslim space.

¹⁹⁵ “Ni kweli aliniamini sana, ila kila mtu anatafuta pesa ama wewe hautaki pesa? Kama singeuza hiyo sukari nisingepata milioni moja na zaidi cash. Si pia yeye anatuhulumu pia tumdhulumu. *Umdhanie ndiye sie—*au sio bwana?”

these kinds of crashes, the devaluation of driving work, and the expansion of ideas of individualized liability have shifted the threshold between intention and accident such that almost any trucking accident is read as an intentional crash. That is, one effect of the use of accidents to create an opportunity for, or to cover up, cargo theft is that any accident that results in cargo loss is considered a theft, and liability for losses incurred is shifted onto drivers.

Companies have embraced this logic, and prosecute drivers for theft as a means of warning other drivers, whether or not they have any evidence that the driver caused the accident on purpose. (Indeed, how does one prove an intentional accident?) In one recent case, a company prosecuted a driver for cargo loss even though the driver had nearly died in the accident and spent months recovering. As soon as he came out of the hospital, they started proceedings against him. In this case the accident itself was the evidence of a criminal intent. One driver told me it's better to die in an accident than survive and be accused of theft, putting the burden of hospital bills and shame on one's family. Others described the lengths they would go to avoid being blamed for a loss—for instance, arranging severe beatings that could persuade investigators they had not colluded in a theft.

Risk, Accident, Crime

The epistemic frameworks surrounding “intentional accidents” in Gaakwen merge the logics of willed and non-willed action into a single framework—the driver commits both accident and crime at the same time. Certain kinds of drivers (especially truck and public transport drivers) are assumed to be at fault when an accident takes place, regardless of the facts on the ground. Thus, the accident is always already a crime.

A useful intervention into the question of intention and accident is presented in Foucault's lecture-essay "The Dangerous Individual." Foucault argues that the rise of industrial accidents led to an idea of harm that could be inflicted *without intention* (Foucault 1978). Through insurance, "no-fault liability" emerged as a category to protect both those who unintentionally inflicted harm, in road or workplace accidents, and innocent "third parties," who had no involvement except happening to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. The actuarial notion of risk helped to describe and categorize the likelihood that one might be involved in such a harm. This had a perverse impact on criminal law, Foucault writes. The idea of a "no-fault" liability transferred into criminal law as the search for the "dangerous individual"—the law became less concerned with establishing the intention of the criminal and more with *the kind of person* who would commit a crime. As Foucault writes,

One can render an individual responsible under law without having to determine whether he was acting freely and therefore whether there was fault, but rather by linking the act committed to the risk of criminality which his very personality constitutes." (1978: 16)

In Foucault's description, then, the concept of the unintentional accident perversely creates the "dangerous individual," a category of person who is likely to commit a crime. While he describes a legal epistemology specific to the context he examines, the relationship between shifting notions of accident and of criminality that he describes is useful for understanding the broader significance of what happens on Kenyan roads. Concepts of agency, fault, and criminality are also shifting along with ideas of intentionality and accident, and these shifts are promoted as much through the monitoring of road behavior as of economic behavior. As safety movements try to erase the concept of "accident" altogether, while companies try to make entrepreneurs of their own employees, a burden is shifted onto individuals who must both take risks and absorb

their damaging consequences. Meanwhile, these frameworks are policed through the criminalization of drivers.

The next and final section examines work, accident, and intention further with relation to the trade in siphoned fuel. I first examine the role of risk in establishing drivers' agency as workers; then I consider how history, economic conditions, and materiality itself have made roadside arbitrage possible, and how these have shaped the moral languages in which it takes place. As in the stories above, unregulated fuel dealing straddles the frameworks of redistribution and risk. Here, however, I focus more on the role of the "remainder" or the "margin" and on the practices of measurement through which this extra share is understood.

IV. LEAKAGE

Drivers arriving in Gaakwen signaled their desire to sell fuel with a hand gesture—it looked like someone holding a bottle by its neck and shaking it to check whether there's anything left inside. This gesture, like that of a drinker testing if there's enough left for one last swig, indicated the essence of what they were selling: a remainder. The trucks that sold fuel were most often returning to home base, and they were usually selling fuel from their own tank—the fuel intended for their own consumption on the trip. Fuel dealers occasionally siphoned fuel that was being carried as cargo, but their daily bread consisted in the smaller transactions that came from truckers selling what remained in their tanks (or—if they had misestimated their usage—buying fuel to tide them over the final stage in their journey).

These gestures were received and interpreted by young men who waited by the roadside for an interested driver. Referred to as "brokers," *mabroker*, the young men tended to gather at

the junction that was the center of Gaakwen, or to wait at the Stage Park Hotel, a restaurant near the junction. To a newcomer in Gaakwen, the trade might not immediately be visible. Even though they gathered at the main intersection, and often did their work in broad daylight, one needed to know what to look for. One might see young men gathering expectantly near the stage. Or, more obviously, young men carrying a length of plastic tubing and a plastic container. Or, most obviously, young men in the process of sucking diesel from a tank, and siphoning it into jerry cans.

The brokers would make a deal with a driver and then call a *mnunuzi*, a “buyer.” The buyers were the chief entrepreneurs of the trade; they rarely appeared on the roadside, preferring to conduct their business by cell phone. A buyer had to have ready cash: nothing happened on credit. When the deal was made, the buyer’s crew of *wakamuaji*, “milkers,” would come and extract the fuel. This crew paid the driver for the fuel, and paid a fee to the broker. Finally, young men called *punda*, donkeys, whose primary job was to carry the full containers, would take the fuel to the warehouses where it was stored for sale.

Leftover, Surplus

Despite the illicit status of fuel dealers’ work, many people in Gaakwen regarded siphoning as a victimless crime. My friend and sometime host Ben explained this by telling me a story about when the founder of a trucking company called Rongai Workshop who was commonly known as “Macho Nne” (“Four Eyes,” because he wore glasses), was tipped off that

his drivers were selling fuel.¹⁹⁶ Rongai Workshop is only a few kilometers from Gaakwen, and truckers coming back in a convey had stopped by Gaakwen to sell their remaining fuel, since they were nearing the end of their journey. Patrolling police officers caught them but promised to look the other way if the drivers would share the proceeds. The truckers agreed but when it came time to pay up they only gave the officers a small payout, 500 shillings (about \$5). The policemen, estimating how many liters had been sold, thought this seemed like too little. But the drivers refused to give more, asking, “why should you deserve more, *kwani ni yako?*” (rudely: “what, you think the fuel is yours?”) and insisted that they were giving the cops a *bribe* not a *cut*. That is, what they were offering the police was not related to the quantity of fuel they were selling, it was just a one-off payment. In saying this, they implied—as Ben did, telling the story—that the fuel was actually theirs to sell, that they had a right to profit from it in ways the policemen did not. The policemen threatened to turn them in but the drivers didn’t budge, so in the end the police accompanied the drivers to their base and reported them to the trucking company boss, Macho Nne. The drivers then told Macho Nne that the policemen were harassing them because they’d refused to bribe them, since Rongai Workshop had a policy of not paying bribes. Macho Nne inspected the vehicles and found that they had the amount of fuel he expected. In the end, it was the policemen who seemed to be in the wrong.

¹⁹⁶ The story of Rongai Workshop is linked to the history of road and railway that also contributed to Gaakwen’s growth. In the aftermath of WWII, Gordon Eccles (Macho Nne), a former soldier and mechanic, decided to settle in the Rift Valley. He began a business repairing machines, and because of his ability to fix the heavy trucks needed to handle Rift Valley mud, found himself in business transporting milk and other goods between farms and the railway station in Rongai. He found a niche in transport over bad roads, using Bedford trucks which he repaired using spare parts salvaged across East Africa. Rongai Workshop now has a reputation as a reliable mid-sized transport company, and the fact that their trucks have “Rongai” written across the front has spread the name of the now-dwindling town far and wide. But with the improvement of Kenya’s highways, Rongai has struggled to compete—the heavy trucks that were ideal for bad roads were less suited to smooth highways. In addition, their strict policies of not going above the legal weight limits for haulage make it hard to compete with trucks that carry twice, or even more, the allowed weight. In 2015 they bought Chinese-made trucks for the first time. Vanessa Evans, the current Managing Director and Eccles’s daughter, commented that her father would have “turned in his grave.”

Ben told this story with great relish, fully aware of the irony of drivers asserting a claim to the fuel and denying the policemen's claim despite the fact that both sides were engaged in what would seem, from the outside, to be equally illegal activities. Embedded in the story was also an explanation of how this was so—how the drivers asserted a sense of ownership over the fuel as against the policemen's and Macho Nne's. Essentially, the argument was that if Macho Nne didn't know he'd lost any fuel, the fuel was the drivers' to sell. This could work in two different ways, according to how they managed to bring the truck home with the right amount of fuel in the tank. Either they replaced what they sold with kerosene—an almost undetectable replacement, and one which, below a certain percentage of total fuel, doesn't affect how well the diesel works in the short term¹⁹⁷—or they managed to save fuel by driving skillfully, most notoriously by “free-wheeling” (coasting) down and up hills, but also through other less risky techniques, like keeping an even speed.¹⁹⁸ In the first case, the fuel could be said to belong to them because no one was the wiser, so no one else was making a claim on it. In the second case, the fuel was theirs because they employed great skill and potentially risked their lives to save fuel to sell. In this second argument, risk was explicitly a source of value. By limiting the ability of truck owners to generate a surplus (that is, to profit from the truckers' labor), but in claiming

¹⁹⁷ Kerosene is taxed at a lower rate, and is thus a cheaper replacement. Tax becomes, intriguingly, one of the “qualities” of the substance, for kerosene both tax and the fact that it can be substituted for diesel contribute to its value—the Energy Regulatory Commission estimates that up to 80% of kerosene demand is for the dilution of motor fuel. The substitution does not pass without complaint, of course, but the practice exists even at regular filling stations and so cannot be blamed on the alternative fuel economy.

¹⁹⁸ Given the heavy traffic on Kenyan highways and the hilly terrain, keeping an even speed requires more skill than it might seem.

their *right* to this excess as the product of their work and/or skill,¹⁹⁹ drivers claimed to be more than employees.

The question of risk thus played a central role in distinguishing between different kinds of excess—the immoral surplus extracted by bosses, who do not risk their own bodies, as against the supplement claimed by drivers. The way that risk plays into moral and ethical questions around the right to a remainder was further evidenced by the way that drivers talked about their driving skill. They asserted themselves as “artisans” of a kind—as skilled workers familiar with the particularities of the trucks they drove and the conditions of driving in Kenya. Drivers used sight, sound, and smell to diagnose truck problems, to estimate how much extra loading was safe, and to gauge how fast they could drive over what kind of terrain. They claimed to know what their trucks could be pushed to do and what not, given the particularities of Kenya roads and police. Engaging with the risk of accident was a large part of this skill. Many of the drivers I spoke with were open about the possibility of death—indeed, courting it was one of the ways they demonstrated their abilities. They boasted of their feats of valor, whether in freewheeling or in knowing how to safely crash their vehicle. Many found road safety regulations specifying maximum speeds, frequency of stops, and required rest durations frustrating, in part because it limited their ability to demonstrate that they could bring their trucks in on time.

Thus the claim of a “right” to sell extra fuel was tightly linked to drivers’ belief that they know how to create this excess through skill and a calculated engagement with risk. They viewed themselves as, and in many ways they were, experts in risk management. This claim resonates

¹⁹⁹ The argument for being able to sell cargo, like fuel, has to do with the fact that they sell within the limits of what the ‘bosses’ find it more convenient to overlook. On an already overloaded truck, it is difficult for an owner to formally report a driver who sells a small amount of the cargo, because the owner is already in a compromised position with respect to regulatory authorities.

with work on truck drivers around the world, which has both focused on their particular status as “risky subjects” (Gysels, Pool, and Bwanika 2001) and on their expertise in managing the risks of the job. Countering popular depictions of truck drivers as overweight and physically incompetent, authors have focused on their expertise in controlling time, their bodies, and their emotions (Gordon 2013; Steyn 2015). Snyder calls truck drivers “rhythm experts” with “professionalized bodies,” pointing out their proficiency in manipulating their bodies and disciplining their attention, even when tired (Snyder 2012). Indeed, drivers’ sense of dignity and meaningful occupation is described as being tied to their ability to deliver cargo on time even at the expense of their own bodies and lives (Ouellet 1994; Snyder 2012). Gaakwen’s drivers, too, insisted that *they* knew where the threshold of exhaustion lay. This was a form of skilled knowledge which they found frustrated by regulations specifying when they must rest and for how long—particularly when external conditions, like delays at checkpoints and cargo loading, created rhythms that upset drivers’ clocks.

Unsurprisingly, the drivers’ sense of appropriate engagement with risk did not always align with that of trucking companies, nor with public discourse around road safety. Road safety interventions have sought to alter the meaning of “accident” by making all road users responsible for harms that take place on the road (Lamont 2010), and as a result “safety” and “risk” have become the terrain of struggles to regulate mobility in Kenya and across the world (Esbester and Wetmore 2015; Lamont and Lee 2015). Drivers were a central object of this regulation but resisted the monitoring, arguing that the regulations around rest and sleep created by companies in the interest of “road safety” affected their ability to deploy their skills in self-management. Some drivers saw safety specifications as making them *more* vulnerable to the vicissitudes of the

road: they saw the preservation of their own agency and freedom as essential to the prevention of accident.

Companies used safety concerns to monitor drivers and suppress their claims to independence—to insist that they were wage workers and not artisans. At Rongai Workshop, the stripped gear plate from a lorry that had struggled to get back into gear was on display. It was a sign—indeed, a warning—to drivers that the company could discern, from the mangled part, the actions that had caused its damage. The object said that the company knew what drivers were doing even when they were on the road. It spoke to the way that drivers and their managers compete over a claim to deep knowledge of the machinery they operate, over appropriate levels of risk, and, indirectly, over drivers' status as employees.

Milking the Road

In this context, it becomes clear that the fuel and accident goods trades represented more for companies than the loss of property alone: they were part of a larger struggle to control both contingency *and* employee agency from a distance. The anxiety over how drivers drive spoke to the contested attempts to create mobile enclosures along the trade route, and to disentangle the road from the social obligations and exchange networks of the roadside. If drivers selling fuel or cargo were asserting their independence as workers, they were also participating in networks of exchange that drew on social connections and local mores around who deserved the cargo. Both drivers (many of whom had connections to the rural hinterlands they drove through) and brokers saw themselves as doing a service for rural populations by performing the risky conversions that are needed to get commodities out of trucks and into local markets. Indeed, many people

benefitted from illicit roadside exchange, including drivers, dealers, police, and a range of rural residents to whom these exchanges made fuel and commodities more accessible price- and distance-wise. In the context of state infrastructural policies that focused development on areas of resource concentration, rural populations relied on irregular provision methods, many of them technically illegal but intentionally overlooked.

Trucking companies' fears around their inability to keep the trade route segregated from these networks was articulated by one trucking company boss in terms of "leakage." Vanessa Evans (the daughter and successor of Macho Nne) told me that fuel siphoning was one of the biggest challenges of her job. Her trucks "leaked" fuel, she said, in much the same way her husband's livestock business leaked milk: "he has to make sure that milk goes into the mouths of his calves and not off the farm in plastic bottles." For Vanessa, leakage was a problem to be resolved. But I found it intriguing that fuel dealers *also* made an analogy between milk and fuel. Fuel siphoners, as I have noted, were called wakamuaji, "milkers." As we will see in what follows, fuel too got taken away from trucks in plastic containers. Despite the different perspectives on this appropriation, the resonance that both Vanessa and fuel dealers noted between milk and fuel is no accident. Both milk and fuel were seen as essential resources—when large landowners and company owners had plenty while others have none, these resources tended to find escape routes. Also, both were *liquids*. As I will explore below, the material form of the commodity, its means of conveyance, and its meaning as a resource came together to produce specific ideas (and forms of measurement) that situated commodities as "take-able" in certain ways.

Rebecca viewed Gaakwen as a particularly dangerous place in terms of fuel leakage. In fact—perhaps because the township had grown up around her childhood home, once rural and secluded—Gaakwen represented for her the living reality of her worst fears as a trucking company boss and as the descendent of a settler family in an area formerly dominated by colonial settlers.²⁰⁰ She told me that once she was flying a small plane over the township and saw a tanker disappearing into a fuel dealer’s warehouse. This confirmed a long-held suspicion: Rebecca believed that Gaakwen actively encouraged her drivers to sell fuel—not just because it provided an opportunity for them to do so, but as though there was something about the place that just *made* people descend into vice of all kinds.

The meaning of “leakage” should be situated in relation to the way that Gaakwen works as an interface. Gaakwen is located amidst highly visible imbalances: first, the highway creates a stark division between “developed” infrastructure and the “underdeveloped” hinterland. Second, it is surrounded by vast farms owned by former settlers, political elite, and multinational corporations. In this context, the “leakage” of resources is perceived by many as a means of redistribution. As Nikhil Anand argues in discussing the “leakiness” of water infrastructure in Mumbai, what is considered leakage by one party can be resource provision for another (Anand 2015), Anand writes, “for over a million of Mumbai’s residents who have been unable to access water legally, leakages allow them access to the vital substance without them having to riot for it” (2015:308). Leakage diffuses the political pressure that would build up from the complete deprivation of a vital resource. Gaakwen’s fuel dealers play a role not unlike those who make

²⁰⁰ Rebecca’s family home is located at the corner of the A104 highway and the road to Rongai. It was built when there was no commerce in this area—the township grew up near the house and expanded until it directly abutted the fence of her compound. She described this as fitting punishment for being involved in the trucking industry, which she called “a dirty business.”

illegal water connections in Anand's account, providing diesel and kerosene to off-road spaces in twenty-liter containers. Because they transport and sell fuel to the "interior" (as people often call the parts of the country that are not served by any major road), they serve as an informal pipeline, channeling fuel leakage to places ignored by centralized distribution networks.

Thinking about this redistribution as leakage draws attention not only to *what* moves but also *how* it moves. The liquid nature of leakage as a metaphor sits in relation to other liquid metaphors that have been used in relation to networked infrastructure, particularly the idea of "flow." In the next paragraphs, I will explore a literature on infrastructure flows in relation to the history of fuel distribution. This will help explain the contrast between these two metaphors, and clarify why metaphors matter in shaping understandings of exchange and resource access.

"Flow" is a concept-metaphor that has been widely used to describe the movement of commodities along infrastructural pathways. It is frequently mobilized in liberal visions of free circulation (and liberal fears around blockage). And several scholars have used ideas of circulation to speak back to liberal ideologies. Tracking the movement of commodified resources like water, electricity, and fuel has allowed these scholars to see how networked infrastructure can exclude certain populations by restricting the movement of resources. As Anna Tsing writes, large-scale infrastructures like roads both facilitate movement of commodities and serve as "structures of confinement" for them (Tsing 2005). Others have demonstrated how infrastructure channels resources in such a way that they can pass right by, or over, a given population: this theme has been particularly present in urban theory and work on slums and other areas that exist in close proximity to formal infrastructure but cannot access it (Amin 2014; Graham and Marvin 2001). Furthermore, these areas come to be defined by their lack of access, such that the lack of

infrastructure is what describes the “informality” of an informal settlement. This is also true for rural areas, where populations that don’t have access to infrastructure are defined by its absence. Infrastructure makes that which surrounds it into its other, or into what Heidegger calls a “standing reserve” (Heidegger 1977).

The way that infrastructures channel resources in ways that reproduce hierarchies between more and less developed regions can help clarify the current relationship of “foreland” and “hinterland” in Kenya. Roads are a key feature in distribution and development patterns that shape where resources like fuel can go and, in turn, determine what areas get defined as “off the grid” or “underdeveloped.”²⁰¹ The hinterland has more traditionally been described as the source of the “raw” materials for trade, a resource reserve that has consistently been plundered by the centers of regional economies. But in the post-independence developmental moment, the hinterland is that region where development need not (yet) go. This logic is visible in Kenya’s “growth poles” policy, enshrined in Tom Mboya and Mwai Kibaki’s seminal “African Socialism and its Application to Planning in Kenya” (Sessional Paper Number 10 of 1965). This policy proposed a trickle-down approach that focused investment on already-advantaged areas. The expectation was that this would create financial and human resources that could then gradually spread into more marginal spaces. In reality, the policy generated development patterns that are marked by a concentration of services and capital-intensive infrastructure in “growth poles” areas.

²⁰¹ Kenya’s oil, like the railway, runs roughly parallel to the highway. Across the country, “last mile” service must be provided by tankers. A second railway and pipeline under construction expand this corridor by a hundred kilometers or so.

The idea that established distribution patterns had entrenched unequal access to fuel was one of the advertised justifications for the liberalization of Kenya's petroleum sector in 1994. The policy argued that the big oil majors—Chevron, Mobil, Total, Shell and BP—concentrated on large urban markets and left unprofitable rural hinterlands under-served. Liberalization was to undo a pricing mechanism that put products out of the reach of the marginalized poor. But the hope that smaller players and the relaxation of capital requirements would help extend fuel distribution hasn't worked out well. The Energy Regulatory Commission claims to have brought greater transparency to price calculations and it has deterred the "cartels" of old. The varied branding on fuel tankers and filling stations is evidence of an influx of new players, many of them local corporations. But this did not result in increased access, as these small players were even less likely to be drawn to the sparsely populated, low demand hinterland. More than two decades later, the logic that shaped pre-liberalization distribution persists. A map of fuel stations continues to show a concentration along a corridor stretching from Mombasa, past Nairobi and on past Gaakwen, then forking with one branch to Lake Victoria and another to the Ugandan border. This was the same trajectory of service distribution, pioneered by the railway, that had been taken by Kenya's oil pipeline, highways, high-voltage electricity pylons, major urban centers, schools, and hospitals. As with distribution so it was with prices. The bulk of the country, falling more than fifty miles north and south of this corridor of development, also suffered the highest fuel prices—a difference of up to twenty percent in price.²⁰²

In light of this history, the roadside trade in siphoned fuel and accident goods can perhaps be seen as ways of actively making development trickle down. But liquid metaphors can also be

²⁰² For a chart of price points across Kenya, see: http://www.erc.go.ke/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=162&Itemid=666

misleading. “Trickles” and “flows” hide the conversions necessary to make this movement possible, and suggest that the liberal metaphor of flow applies universally to the movement of commodities. This is problematic because it implies that nothing needs to be done to help resources reach under-serviced areas: liquid metaphors have underpinned “trickle-down economics” precisely because they imply that the movement of resources happens on its own (thanks to gravity or osmosis) without need for more active intervention.

This is precisely the logic that fuel siphoning works against. The metaphors, skilled practices and performances, and forms of measurement involved in the roadside fuel trade make it clear that resources do not just “flow” to those who lack them. Even when they do exist in liquid form, commodities’ circulation takes place in a more contained, individuated, and manipulated way than streaming metaphors suggest—and similarly, their “diversion” requires *conversions* (Guyer 2004) that substantially alter the form and value of the commodity itself. As is suggested by the riskiness of traders’ methods for diverting commodities, commodities must, in fact, be purposefully made to cross the threshold that has been constructed by histories of uneven development. Commodities must move out of the truck’s tank and into jerry cans, to be loaded onto pickup trucks or motorcycles that can navigate terrain that a tanker could not.

Roadside populations recognize implicitly the need for such conversions: it is clear to them that resources do not “trickle” into their communities without active intervention. Even though dealers do make a profit from exploiting their position as intermediaries and engaging in a kind of arbitrage, most people I spoke to did not see this as an immoral activity, nor did fuel dealers themselves. Indeed, the fear of moral contamination that characterized Vanessa’s approach to Gaakwen was by no means widely shared. As one friend said, calling fuel dealing a

“sector” of Gaakwen’s economy, “the fuel trade is illegal (*haram*) but it is legitimate (*halal*) for those who are invested in it.”²⁰³ Within Gaakwen, the fuel trade is well established. Fuel dealers were organized into a trade association, with representation in township governance. The association regulated prices, prosecuted thieves, and was generally concerned with protecting Gaakwen’s reputation as a place where it was safe to park and to sell fuel at a fair price. Fuel dealers saw themselves as both providing a much-needed resource to marginalized populations and engaging in a highly profitable enterprise—and these two goals were not necessarily in tension with one another.

Nevertheless, something like an idea of “leakage” persisted in dealers’ idea that what they traded was a remainder, or at least an insignificant quantity; small enough, that is to be considered a leak and not a burst dam. In constructing this idea, however, they drew on entirely different metaphors. This is illustrated by the role that domestic agricultural animals played in the description of fuel siphoning: cattle and donkey (not pipes and tanks) underpinned the metaphors for extraction and cargo.²⁰⁴ Let us consider how *these* metaphors operate and what they suggest about the ideological-cultural universe within which fuel dealing is framed.

The animal metaphors suggest that commodities shifted into a moral universe defined at least in part by agricultural life and animal husbandry (as well as, perhaps, by another form of “social banditry,” cattle rustling). The analogy of fuel with milk illustrates particularly neatly the arguments presented by scholars from E.P. Thompson to James C. Scott around the moral economy—the way that resources are embedded in structures of meaning, sociality, and justice that extend beyond the realm of financial transaction. The social importance of cattle in a

²⁰³ “Biashara ya mafuta ni haramu lakini ni halali kwa wahusika wakuu kwenye sekta hiyo.”

²⁰⁴ More, I have read that the warehouses where dealers store fuel are called “shambas”—farms.

formerly pastoralist community suggests a desire to actively link the work done on the road to a history of cattle keeping (and, perhaps, of successful evasion of colonial restrictions on cattle—*see* Anderson (1986) on the moral economy of pastoralism and stock theft). These metaphors suggest the remnants of a moral economy of reproduction and success, organized around cattle and agriculture, that is now being supplanted.²⁰⁵

This appealing association with a moral economy of cattle is, however, muddled by the fact that—as discussed in Chapter 4—not all milk is created equal. Grade cows produce milk for the market, kienyeji cows produce milk only for consumption. Thus calling fuel “milk” does not clearly anchor it in a moral space of use value as against exchange value. Rather, I believe that the metaphor of “milk” expresses two interrelated things: first, an acknowledgement of the way in which the fuel dealer is a “parasite,” in Michel Serres’ sense of the parasite as the one who diverts a system to its own ends but without exhausting the source (Serres 2007);²⁰⁶ and second, an attention to the importance of the form of the commodity and its containment.

Evans-Pritchard wrote of the Nuer and cattle, “The Nuer might be called parasites of the cow, but it might be said with equal force that the cow is the parasite of the Nuer...In truth the relationship is symbiotic” (1940:36). The keepers of cattle live off the milk and blood of the cow; but the cow equally lives from the care of its keepers. Key to the relationship is that keepers don’t suck the cow dry, they merely remove a small remainder such that the cow can live to

²⁰⁵ The relationship of cattle rustling to more contemporary forms of banditry is also fascinating, but the contemporary understanding of stock theft as an illicit activity does not reflect historical positions on its morality: a fascinating footnote in Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale’s discussion of capitalist development in Kenya, they note that Kipsigis use the same word for “wage labor” and for “cattle rustling.” I interpret this as a triangulation around risk and wealth which suggests that one engages in high-risk activities for a short time in order to accrue the social and economic capital needed to start one’s own household—including facilitating both marriage and land acquisition.

²⁰⁶ As Serres writes, “You don’t need much experience to know that goods do not always arrive so easily at their destinations. There are always interceptors who work very hard to divert what is carried along these paths” (11).

produce another day.²⁰⁷ As Serres writes, unlike the predator, the parasite doesn't consume its prey entirely. Rather, the parasite steers production in a new direction, and in so doing transforms the system itself. In attending to the transformation that takes place in the process of diversion, Serres points out the importance of the form of mediation through which "diversion" becomes a new "relation," such that "noise" (the parasite) becomes "communication." And this attention to the *form of mediation* brings us back to the question of liquid and its conveyance.

Cattle are uniquely suited to thinking analogically about the relationship between liquid and the units in which it travels, and as such they reveal something that "flow" does not. Paying attention to the truck and to the cow make clear that liquid commodities move within *containers*, whether the tanker's tank or the cow's udder. When siphoners "milk" a truck for fuel, this milking describes the action of extracting a liquid out of a "tank" and putting it into another, smaller, container. The extraction does not exhaust the source but it creates a new kind of property, with the help of a container. These containers are the focus of the next and final section.

"What is left rather than what is taken"

In James Scott's seminal discussion of the "moral economy of the peasant," he argues that risk-averse peasants will prioritize subsistence over profit—they focus, he says, on "what is left rather than what is taken" (Scott 1977). This converges in unexpected ways with Jane Guyer's notion of the "marginal gain," which at once draws on and inverts the concept of profit margin in discussing the profits made from asymmetrical exchange. In my final example, I bring these together in describing how risk-oriented fuel dealers understand their profits through an

²⁰⁷ Evans-Pritchard notes that while Nuer think cow blood is delicious, they claim to bleed the cow for its own health and not for food.

amount that is *remaindered*. The organization around “margins” rather than “price” constitutes a moral economy that is not organized in opposition to profit but rather decenters it. Here, I explore this through questions of measurement, in particular, the unit of measurement that provided by the twenty-liter jerry can.

The central role of the jerry can in fuel dealing demonstrates that unit sizes in popular economies are determined not only by how they measure or what they symbolize, but also how they facilitate movement. Fuel dealers are able to divert fuel because they extract it in a size and at a cost that is small enough to be at once thought of as “leakage,” and accessible to rural buyers. Using jerry cans, they extract and sell the fuel in quantities that are more portable across uneven surfaces (by motorcycle, or by pickup truck) than the quantities required to fill a fuel station’s tank. This represents an inversion of the large-scale distribution mechanisms linked to economies of scale—in these economies of *unscale*, circulatory pathways are defined by the relative smallness of what they carry.²⁰⁸ By selling in smaller units and using vehicles that can carry fuel across varied terrain, unregulated fuel dealers make fuel accessible to the interior. They also exploit their status as threshold operators, those who “set the premium for access,” to make what Guyer calls a marginal gain.

My closing example has to do with the methods of calculation that are tied to these containers. These methods of calculation, I argue, offer insight into how the transaction itself is understood. Dealers use ten or twenty-liter plastic containers, called *mitungi* (sing: *mtungi*), when extracting and transporting fuel. Originally steel containers for carrying fuel (jerry cans),

²⁰⁸ Some economic analysts have recently used the term “economies of unscale” to identify a trend in so-called “sharing economies” and other technology-facilitated distribution models, in which dispersed demand can be served efficiently. I use the term not because fuel dealing mimics these practices but because it speaks quite nicely to the variable scales of the unregulated fuel trade.

mitungi were first used in Kenya by the German military, which used them to manage fuel supply during the long-distance, off-piste campaigns of World War II. Today, new and recycled plastic *mitungi* are used for fetching, ferrying, and storing all kinds of liquid. They serve not only as containers, but also as ways of tracking and measuring use—household water usage, for instance, is often calculated in twenty-liter increments. In this way, the size of a *mitungi*—twenty liters—has become a widespread unit of measurement, particularly in popular economies. In fact, twenty has become what Jane Guyer calls a “threshold number”—one might count in individual liters up to twenty, but after that, the twenty-liter unit becomes the base number. From there, one counts in *mitungi* rather than in liters.²⁰⁹ Thus mitungi are not just useful as vessels, but also provide an evaluative function. Their secondary, recycled, use is often linked to their ability to measure (as when someone takes a glass liquor bottle to buy kerosene and uses the size of the bottle to gauge whether the seller has given the correct amount). The containers’ usefulness inheres in their standardization as much as in their ability to contain liquid.

Siphoners used plastic containers for extracting fuel. They preferred the thin plastic containers used in water dispensers to the heavier plastic jerry cans, because the thinness of the plastic allowed them to expand the containers. (These thinner containers were also called *mitungi*, even though they were slightly differently shaped, because they also held twenty liters of water.) Siphoners prepared these containers by pouring fuel into them and placing them under a hot tin roof. The heated fuel and vapors would expand the plastic, so that the container could hold more fuel than the measurement associated with it. Thus, when they extracted “twenty liters,” showing a driver the full container as an indication of the amount extracted, fuel dealers

²⁰⁹ The *mitungi* also resembles the *debe*, originally oil canisters and now widely used to measure out and sell grain, beans, maize or other granular products at market.

also earned a bit of extra. This is one of the ways they created a marginal gain. Using the flexibility of one of modernity's materials, plastic, they de-standardized the standards themselves.

The conversion was important because dealers set their price by the *mtungi*, not in terms of a price per liter. When a broker would make a deal with a driver, he would show him the container he planned to use—the container was at once the physical vessel for the fuel and the unit of exchange. Drivers understood that there was a grey area in which they were likely to be defrauded—they knew some additional amount was being taken, though they might not be sure exactly how much. In their choice of what dealer to trade with, drivers bargained more over the extra (how much they are likely to lose on the deal) than the price itself. For this reason, viewing the container was important in negotiations between brokers and driver over the price and quantity available for trade.

For dealers, the expansion was a means of making an additional profit, but the role of the extra space went beyond that. It came to define the entire transaction—dealers imagined their profit not in terms of a monetary amount but in terms of this “extra” fuel. When I asked a dealer how much he earned on an average transaction, he didn't have a number to hand: he responded by first telling me the price at which he usually bought “twenty liters” (one expanded *mtungi*) of fuel, then explaining that that containers he used actually held more like twenty-five liters, then telling me how much he sold twenty liters (one *not-expanded mtungi*) for. As it moved out of trucks and into dealers' networks, then, the fuel underwent a transformation in the form of calculation itself—from a calculation based on price per liter, to one based on the extra space in a *mtungi*.

As Guyer writes, price is not always the main arena of economic transaction. For moral, social, and calculative reasons, negotiations might center around something other than price: for instance, the minimum size of a unit, the number of units, or the amount of excess that the seller will allow the buyer to skim (Guyer 2004). In this case, to bargain in terms of a price per liter perhaps resembled too much the transaction that might take place at a fuel station. Instead the siphoners' transaction, semi-hidden between the bodies of tractor-trailers, using performative techniques of persuasion and illusion (like switching out the container for a new one), worked with methods of exchange and calculation that preserve a sense of marginality, smallness, even as they make up a substantial portion of Kenya's fuel trade.²¹⁰ Thus the shift in form is also a shift in meaning.

My argument that in converting the form of the commodity dealers also converted its meaning is supported by fuel dealers' discomfort around the fact that they sometimes sell to fuel stations. Dealers had a sense that selling to petrol stations crossed some kind of a line; of all their buying and selling activities, this was the one they found most "illegal" and the most morally problematic—it was the aspect of their trade that they were most reluctant to discuss. The discomfort appeared to be linked to a perverse nationalism (because of dealers' sense that they were depriving the government of tax revenue) but also to the feeling that having once converted fuel across a threshold between the "transnational" and "the local," dealers found it uncomfortable to go back again—re-entering a market space in which fuel is calculated in small and divisible units, at prices set by the Energy Regulatory Commission, in a built-to-purpose structure. Even as the fuel itself has not been materially altered, it has become a different kind of

²¹⁰ Okoth, Edwin. "War on Tainted Fuel Far from Won," *Daily Nation*, August 27, 2017.

commodity—it has crossed a threshold from regime where calculations presume the classical grounds of equal exchange, to one where transactions take place across difference, and exchanges involve conversions.

V. CONCLUSION

This chapter has presented a close look at how drivers, dealers, and roadside residents describe Gaakwen’s “diversions.” This discussion reveals a complex pattern of moralities, in which these marginal activities are variously tolerated as means of “getting by,” appreciated as a form of redistribution to overlooked populations, and celebrated as a demonstration of the savvy tactics of intrepid entrepreneurs. I explore this pattern of moralities as it becomes visible in outright justifications and in metaphors and analogies, but also in the practices of extraction and measurement through which roadside residents and goods brokers calculate the value of appropriated commodities (and establish their right to them). The legitimization of these activities, I argue, is linked not only to their content—what is being done and whether or not it should be understood as theft—but also with their form—how, when, in what units, and with what distribution mechanisms.

In the moral arenas of Gaakwen trade, an active acceptance of illicit deals and the traders who broker them is linked to histories of inclusion and exclusion that become institutionalized in infrastructure provision patterns and then expressed through ideas around price and access. Gaakwen’s status as an interface is constructed through and felt in relation to these histories. Similarly, looking at “intentional accidents” reveals that the shifting threshold between intention

and accident gets made and remade through discourses around “risk” and “liability” that themselves are tied to legal institutions, economic pressures, and even geopolitics. Even as disciplinary interventions seek to construct road users (especially drivers) as risk-bearing subjects, road entrepreneurs celebrate their ability to take and manipulate risk.

By showing the central role of ideas of marginality in Gaakwen’s illicit trades, I revisit the question of moral economies in an economy marked by inequality and marginalization, and by a complex engagement with risk. Describing how truckers and brokers claim their right to take fuel both through a moralization around absence and extra (“no one even knew it was missing,” “it was leftover”), through practices of calculation and bargaining that center on *remainder* rather than on price, and through arguing that *they* have agency over their work and its role in producing profit, I argue that hinterland populations on the margins of transnational capital are contesting the right of transport and commodity owners to exclusive claims over surplus. They do this not merely by appropriating cargo, but by reimagining the category of the profit margin itself. Without directly contesting the right of larger enterprises to make a profit from their labor, these responses convert the surplus into “remainder.”

CONCLUSION

In this dissertation I have described the variegated way in which rural spaces in western Kenya are becoming “post-agrarian.” Kenya’s ongoing agrarian transition—in which small-farm incomes have been reduced or become erratic, even as opportunities for waged work have become scarce—has contributed to a situation that Andries du Toit calls “a double bind: both post-agrarian *and* post-industrial” (2017:2). Unlike most approaches to agrarian change, which begin from the point of view of the land, I have focused on the road and the array of opportunities and hazards it presents to rural populations seeking alternatives both to farming and to employment. I have discussed transformations, on and along the road, in the form and meaning of land, family, work, and value.

The ethnographic chapters of the dissertation have served as a lenticular lens, alternately illuminating a particular moment or theme that helps to elucidate an uneven process of change: boda boda motorcycles and speed; a truck stop and real estate; the *boma* and the accidental death; road dealers and the remainder. From these different vantage points, I have proposed that roads and high-speed mobility mediate risk as an embodied conceptual form by shaping ideas of time and direction, harm and causation, and value and loss.

Through these chapters I have examined how rural populations develop new forms of social and economic practice and, in particular, how they do so in relation to contingency and risk. While engagement with entrepreneurial risk has been an important feature of rural economies since the late colonial period, work on and along the road carries with it a more pronounced possibility of bodily harm than farming did. At the same time, road workers are the

targets of disciplinary risk discourses around road safety and HIV. On and along the road, then, risk is present as a concept that at once justifies engaging in hazard (as entrepreneurial risk-taking) and castigates risk-takers. This combination has entrenched a more embodied and embattled understanding of the importance of *calculation*. Thus I argue that at roadside “black spots,” sites known for their riskiness, one can see how roadside residents are actively adopting risk-oriented practices and being entrained in withstanding hazard.

I opened the dissertation with the story of an oil tanker crash and explosion that occurred at a black spot on Kenya’s most heavily trafficked highway, the A104. I argued that neither necessity nor recklessness—the forms in which the event was most commonly explained—was an adequate explanation for this event. Rather, the event had to be understood within rural conditions in which risk—as both conceptual form and experience—was a feature of everyday life. Sachangwan villagers were not ignorant of the dangers of petrol. But in a context in which the road offered an important source of supplementary livelihoods, and often in the form of accident salvage, risk was normalized. The villagers’ marginalization from the world of circulating commodities meant that access to them was, almost by definition, contingent. And Sachangwan villagers, like other roadside residents, had constructed that contingency as risk: that is, as the hazard that was inherent in opportunity. The recounting of the Sachangwan crash opened up the two central themes of the dissertation: on the one hand, the opportunities the road offers in the context of declining rural livelihoods (and how the history, symbolism, and material form of the road shape those opportunities in particular ways). On the other, the production of risk as a calculative and affective form in which value and loss are intertwined.

Road accidents were the original focus of this dissertation: I aimed to understand how Kenya's "epidemic" of crashes generated a subjectivity linked to the need for mobility and circulation in austerity-era Kenya—and in particular, how an experience of uncertainty could be both *understood* and *felt* in relation to the alternately degraded or newly constructed materiality of roads infrastructure. Over the course of my research, however, I came to understand that the road should not be understood merely in terms of mobility. Roads also created emplaced sites of work and trade. The relationship between roads and contemporary material and subjective formations was thus linked not only to the way that roads created the conditions for circulation but also in the way they served as platforms for and sites of popular economies. More, nodes along the road functioned as interfaces between rural populations and circulating people, goods, and money. My "black spot" research sites became something more than places at which I could study accidents. I began to see them as gateways, frontiers, or "niches," where rural communities and road traffic were coming together to produce specific kinds of social and economic practice.

As Guyer argues, "niches" are economic and social formations predicated on a dynamic tension between different forms of production and informed both by capitalist processes and non-capitalist traditions and socialities. These are interfaces at which one can examine "small, general, and indigenously-created change" (1998:17). In the sites I have described here, new forms of risky road work were being practiced, debated, and made legitimate; and new forms of measurement, contract, and also inequality were being generated. Practices of salvage from accidents, of "risky" driving, and of speculative engagement with the road made these roadside communities into sites featuring specific ethical and calculative formations. These niches, I have argued, were organized around their appropriation of risk. Thus, with a glance back to a now-

defunct debate on the role of risk and calculation among “peasants” (Lipton 1968; Popkin 1979; Scott 1977), I sought to show how specific engagements with risk were being developed in relation to the road and its possibilities. Rural roadside residents engaged in trying to make a living and conjure progress are *also* engaged in self-conscious and calculated engagement with the possibility of loss. More, loss was not only financial but also carried the potential for injury, disease, alienation, death, and destruction associated with the road.

The task, then, was to ask what these sites might tell us about social and economic practice amidst the ongoing transformation of rural areas. In particular, I aimed to understand the role of marginality and contingency in shaping subjects who were *willing* risk bearers. My doubled perspective on “accumulation” and “accident” emerged from this question—if risk is central to accumulation under conditions of austerity, then to aspire to accumulation is to engage in risk. Thus, I focused on the way that rural residents constructed their work in relation to not only discourses of bodily risk (represented both by road safety and HIV awareness campaigns) but also to a discourse of entrepreneurial possibility. Yet I further argue that the risk concept cannot entirely contain the meaning of loss. Unexpected events can also provide the conditions for re-examining prevailing forms of social and economic life: structures of kinship, the nature of employment and work, and the production of value itself—which, it turns out, is sometimes created “accidentally.”

I consider the question of “accumulation” ethnographically in Part I by examining the interplay between road-based and land-based social and economic possibilities in the post-structural adjustment era. Chapters 3 and 4 present the narrative structures and practices of accumulation that aimed to transform high-risk road work into (re)productive value, in light of

local moralities that perceived road work as being too “fast” to generate lasting value. These two chapters describe the cultural and ethical “work” that was needed to integrate road work and rural social mores; to legitimate new forms of profit; and to smooth over the hazards of the road. Chapter 3 explores how boda boda riders in western Kenya coordinated the rhythms of road work and rural life in order to slow down and aggregate money, thereby producing value. Chapter 4 discusses visions of futurity in a truck stop, and shows how local smallholders became landlords invested in the speculative future of roadside real estate. Here, roadside residents worked to dispel the negative aspects of risk (speed, HIV, accidents) by focusing on its positive face: a future of growth and increase.

If Part I describes how a framework is being put into place within which risk is a key to accumulation and value, Part II decenters this framework by focusing on the fractures and value inversions that emerge in relation to road accidents. The two chapters in this section explore quite different ways in which accidents are understood as “intentional.” Chapter 5 considers how road crashes can deepen fractures within already-fraught family relationships. These work together to produce the injurious event as a site of dispute around the nature of social propriety. Rumors and accusations about what “really” caused an accident train the anthropologist’s attention onto alternate ways of thinking about why causation matters—not only in terms of the logic of the event, but also the logic of relationships. As Evans-Pritchard writes of one explanatory framework, witchcraft, it “explains *why* events are harmful to man and not *how* they happen” (1976:27). The final chapter, Chapter 6, explores the question of intentionality from quite a different perspective. It discusses how road dealers engaged in illicit trade play with the idea of the “true accident,” real contingency, even while actively undoing the possibility of

accident by actively *causing* crashes. This appropriation of accident existed alongside another decentered concept: the reconstruction of profit in the form of remainder. Together, I argue, these produce a sense of economic and social life defined through marginalization.

In sum, this project aimed to offer a textured account of changing rural life at the margins of a political-economic regime that was deeply invested in both infrastructural transformation and entrepreneurial self-help. I track how rural roadside communities labored to at once draw prosperity from the road and to contain its dangers, in light of the Kenyan state's simultaneous investment in large-scale infrastructure and withdrawal from the provision of rural welfare. In this context, where rural residents were given "development" in the form of a connectivity that does not necessarily serve them, roads represented at once a source of opportunity and a site of pronounced hazard. The conjuncture of opportunity and hazard, I argue, gave rise to a specific "ethics of risk"—questions around who one should care for and how, as well as what kinds of economic opportunities one can legitimately access, and at what cost to one's physical or moral integrity. Through such questions rural residents elaborate ethical-economic concepts of profit and loss that accommodate the exigency of hazard. Thus, these considerations entrench not only physical danger but also entrepreneurial risk ideologies into the imagination and practices of rural roadside residents. Departing from analyses that perceive rural spaces as sites of risk amelioration or risk aversion, I argue that rural communities forge social and economic practices *in relation to* rather than in *opposition to* risk. At the same time, I track concepts of contingency and loss that escape the risk framework to produce other sorts of possibilities.

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