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America, Here We Come

In the 1990s a chant became popular in Ghanaian schoolyards: "America, here we come." More aspirational than attainable, the slogan captured a popular fantasy of escape. But what of life on the other side, the afterlife of the fantasy, when the fantasy becomes reality? How have these Togolese DV pioneers managed in the tumult of the twenty-first-century American Dream—and now in Trump's America?

Despite long odds in making the request, I was hoping to get a short-term visa for Kodjo—a tourist visa—so that we could make the rounds of clients of his in the US. I asked a consul I knew whether he would consider it. He had read an article I wrote about Kodjo, and despite knowing his history, still said maybe. In the end, however, Kodjo was denied because a headstrong client had reported him to the embassy a week before the interview, claiming malfeasance. Bad luck once again.

With Kodjo out as my guide, I contacted a friend of his, a lottery selectee I had hosted for six months after his arrival in the States in 2003. Jeannot

knew many of Kodjo's winners and agreed to stand in for him, also seeing it as a way to meet compatriots and extend his networks. He arranged visits to Newark; Omaha; and Moline, Illinois. I also visited Togolese lottery winners in Silver Spring, Maryland; Washington, DC; Raleigh; and Phoenix. Far from exhaustive, the following portraits nevertheless offer a sketch of DV winners' lives in the US—lives suspended between disparate worlds and between the upbeat fantasy of the US and its hard-edged reality.

THE COUPLE'S APARTMENT was in a stucco-pink rental complex, $600 a month, Walmart-walls, identical units glued together. The June heat in Phoenix was searing, 113 degrees Fahrenheit that day, while a window air conditioning unit clang-clanged in the back room, lowering the temperature inside to the high 90s, maybe. Kosi's wife and two young children were sitting on the carpet in the living room eating *fufu* with a green leaf sauce and red palm oil, the type Togolese fight over. They invited me to join their small feast, a necessary gesture, but I declined—also obligatory—adding that I would be in Lomé in two days, where I would have my fill of Togolese food. It was the little boy's birthday, and when they were finished eating, his parents feted him in properly American style, with a store-bought cake with candles and a verse of "Happy Birthday." I gave the boy a $5 bill, then added, "Bonne arrivée aux Etats-Unis!" (Welcome to the US!).

I had been curious to meet this couple who decided to settle in the Southwest sight unseen and far from family—an unusual choice for Togolese in the diaspora, who tend to gravitate toward friends or relatives in the East or Midwest, nodes of familiarity. But after two wintry months in Silver Spring—a large Togolese gathering place in the DC area—they followed a friend's advice and bought plane tickets to Arizona, where, they were told, jobs were easy to come by for those with papers. They preferred 100 degrees in the Phoenix summer to the cold of winter elsewhere.

A misadventure had brought us together. Friends of Kodjo's, they asked him to send food from Lomé with a recent lottery winner who was soon to arrive in North Carolina. For Kodjo it was a way to make some extra money—cashing in a client's unused luggage allowance—while also consolidating a friendship that might yield business down the road. When the suitcase arrived—packed with dried leaves and spices, locust bean paste, baobab nuts, small dried fish, medicinal roots—Kodjo asked whether I would send it to the couple in Phoenix. But Greyhound misplaced the suit-

case and it never arrived. (How the famous bus line could have lost such a suitcase was a mystery to us all, and to this couple, a shock to their sense that "in America, things work.") Two months later, visiting Phoenix for a family event and carrying Greyhound's $100 check for lost luggage—this skimpy reimbursement another punch in the face—I decided to deliver my apologies in person and check in on this adventurous couple.

As advertised, they had quickly found work in Phoenix: the man loading luggage at the airport, his wife working as a nurse's aide. Both thirty-somethings, they had attended university before the man opened a string of cybercafés in Lomé, from which he still draws a small income. These advantages were perhaps why they were more willing than others to strike out on their own. But their case also provoked a query: If they were not the precarious subjects of the Lomé street, why did they decide to leave for parts unknown? "You had a good life there, surrounded by family and friends," I prodded. "Why would you leave all that behind?" "Who in Lomé wouldn't depart for the US if they were chosen in this lottery?" the man responded. "It's an opportunity to have an even better life, especially for our children. It's a chance to realize our dreams."

His words join those of others across the subregion, from Côte d'Ivoire to Cameroon, that the "bush" beyond—and today, especially, "whiteman kontri" (Nyamnjoh and Page 2002)—was where wealth and adventure were to be had, and that this constituted an irresistible allure. Indeed, travel and mobility—mobility as an end, Geschiere (2016) has called it—seems written into the cultural DNA of West Africans. Youth in remote villages where I have worked in northern Togo describe their annual escape to work on farms in Nigeria—sneaking off in the middle of the night, against their parents' and teachers' wishes, risking much in crossing two borders into a country where they are unable to speak any of the languages, but insisting on the experience nonetheless—as motivated by the pursuit of travel and "adventure." They go to make money, of course, but when I have asked them whether they would stay if they received the same take-home pay as they get in Nigeria, most said that they would still leave. "Why?" "L'aventure."[1]

Another arresting example of the allure of the beyond involved a local big man, the director of a school, whom I met in northern Togo in 2015. He paid me a surprise visit in July of that year to say that he and his wife had been selected in the DV Lottery and had just successfully passed the embassy interview. He wanted to show off his visa but swore me to secrecy: "You know Togolese. They will be jealous and try to disrupt my trip. Other

With the school director in Washington, DC, November 2017.

than my wife, not a single person knows, not even my children." "Will you tell them before you leave?" I asked. "Only the night before, and only my children."

After congratulating him and discussing what might be in store for him on the other side, I gently suggested he might want to take a leave from his work while trying out life in the US, in case he decided that he had made the wrong decision. I couldn't shake the thought of this man of stature, widely respected locally and invited to all the important events, cleaning toilets and scrubbing floors in a US suburb. But he would have none of it. It was unthinkable that his life in whiteman kontri might be worse off than it was in Togo, that his dream might end in disappointment and downward mobility. (I visited the former school director in 2017 in Washington, DC. He was working two jobs, one as an all-night cashier at CVS, the other as a security guard at a museum. "When do you sleep?" I asked. "I don't," he said ruefully. "But I need to make the most of this opportunity.")

When the small Phoenix family and I had had our fill of birthday cake, and with the heat still pulsing through the walls, Kosi said he had to leave for work. In parting he asked me to greet Kodjo in Lomé, then sang his praises, saying how useful he had been in helping them prepare their dossier for the embassy interview. I told him this was a constant client refrain, but I

added how ironic it was that they had received visas while he was unable to. "It all depends on your destiny. Perhaps it was not his destiny to have been chosen in that lottery."

THE APARTMENT IN MOLINE could have been in Phoenix—or Omaha or Raleigh. Modular box units stacked next to one another on the outskirts of town, outskirts that seemed more the center than the periphery. If Midwestern kitsch on the outside, theirs was West African modern inside, the living room furnished in that interior aesthetic that is common from Abidjan to Lagos: wooden cabinets against the walls; somber overstuffed couch and fauteuils; long, gaudy draperies; a picture of Jesus on the wall. The centerpiece of this tableau was a large flat-screen TV, the latest model, glued to the wall, always on—soccer, African MTV, Africa News. "Televisions are not too expensive," Jeannot said. "That's the first thing you buy as soon as your paycheck allows. It shows you have arrived, that your dream is real. It also offers lessons about your new country and helps you learn English."

We entered through the kitchen, where two roiling stewpots were sending slightly acrid aromas into the air, goat meat in one, *gboma* sauce in the other. Jeannot asked if he could taste the sauce, responding to his sampling with a big smile. As we entered the living room, a Nigerian band was playing hipster on the wide screen.

Our host, a large man with powerful hands and a gentle demeanor—"Le Doyen" (the Mayor, the Elder), Jeannot called him, because of his size and bearing—has been in the US for twelve years. He came to Moline when he first arrived, then left for Raleigh for two years (where he met Jeannot), before returning to Moline. "Life is calmer and cheaper here. I can save more to send home." Calm seemed to me an understatement. The wide boulevards that cut through the Moline suburb were mostly empty, with those few vehicles in circulation moving at a glacial—rural Americana—pace past the familiar convenience stores. A pace and a calm, however, that must be reassuring to new immigrants, slowing down the everyday to something more graspable.

We speak in French, as Le Doyen is more comfortable in that language than in his still-broken English. But he and Jeannot switch often to their native Ewe, leaving me behind, a transition that enlivens the repertoire and brings animated gestures to the conversation.

This gentle giant has a wife and four children in Lomé, and a second wife

here in Moline, a middle-aged Togolese woman with a soft smile, whom he met at the Tyson meat plant. They have a three-year-old daughter—cute as a button, plastic beads braided into her hair—who ran laps around the living room as we chatted. His second wife's eighteen-year-old daughter had just arrived from Lomé, getting a visa through the family reunification option. However, when the Mayor himself applied to bring over the children from his first marriage, he was turned down, he said, because he hadn't declared them on his DV application over a decade ago.[2]

All the inventions and cross-hatchings of kinship back home reemerge in this far-flung diasporic outpost. Of mixed families and juggled marriages, of relatedness conceived broadly, of alliances of convenience, of risks and fraught attachments. These improvised arrangements can be particularly difficult for women—those who come on their own or those who follow spouses already here. The latter have to adjust, with little warning or preparation, to a foreign land where they lack cultural and linguistic accountancy, and they often retreat to living "between four walls," as Jeannot put it, with some even developing "psychosis." The wife of one man we visited in Newark never came out of the bedroom to greet us—unusual for Togolese, but a state she had been in, her husband told us, since she arrived in the States six months earlier. One of the consuls in Lomé told me that mental illness was common among those diasporics requesting visa renewal—those who had come back to Lomé for treatment, before seeking to return to the US—and assumed they had succumbed to the anxieties and pressures of lives lived in between.

Those women who come on their own or through arranged marriages struggle as well, especially in finding partners. Most middle-aged Togolese men in the US are married and the younger ones have girlfriends back home. Moreover, the older these women get, the harder it is to find someone in Togo—not the case for men in a culture where a husband is expected to be older, even by a decade or more.

An attractive twenty-seven-year-old DV winner we met in Omaha works at a furniture outlet assembling tables and chairs—"you're a carpenter," I teased, a job women never perform back home, to which she responded that she had to lie about her work to her mother, who would never approve. She is adrift, worried about getting older and still without husband. Jeannot asked whether she couldn't find someone here in Omaha, "with all these eligible bachelors," pointing at two handsome new arrivals sitting across the room. "I don't want to play the field," she responded. "None of these younger men

are serious. They will sleep with you, but they all have girlfriends back home they plan to marry. I'm not interested in something temporary." "Why don't you look for someone at home then?" I asked. "It's true the husbands will line up when they learn that you have papers. But in that case they're only marrying the visa. Most of those marriages end up in trouble."

Confirming this picture of marital apocalypse, though now from the other side of the gender divide, a man we met in Omaha had returned to Lomé to find a wife, but their marriage was fraught from the beginning. She was above him in class—he had applied for the DV Lottery as a welder under the job option, while she had the baccalaureate and had attended university for several years. The mismatch between their interests and desires should have been apparent from the start, but she was seduced by the visa. Despite giving birth to two children after she arrived in Omaha, fight led to fight and she eventually moved out. "He won't be able to find another partner," Jeannot mused. "He has children by one woman. What other woman would want to marry him? His interests would be divided between the two wives and their children, which can lead to unending strife, even spiritual attack."

These stories suggest a broader crisis in social reproduction or at the very least a strong challenge to established norms in such diasporic communities. Surely not surprising, as diasporas simultaneously reproduce and unsettle long-standing assumptions (Clifford 1988; S. Hall 1990; Gilroy 1993)—"repetition with a difference," Gates (1988) has called it—but a sad stew to be in for those who imagined their lives would now be lived on the mountaintop.

THE EIGHTEEN-YEAR-OLD who had just arrived from Lomé, the daughter of Le Doyen's second wife, served us food and drink—Guinness and fufu with goat meat and gboma sauce. She had an airy presence, gliding in and out with dishes, polite to a fault, as is customary when Togolese host strangers. I asked the Mayor about his and his wife's work at the Tyson plant, where seven hundred Togolese are employed (alongside an equal number of Mexicans, Vietnamese, and Congolese)—the new American Midwest, a "global heartland" (Miraftab 2016) filled with recent immigrants, certainly not Trump's America.

He detailed factory life with precision, even pride. After ten years working at Tyson, his salary was a decent $20 an hour. He had spent time in every department and now had supervisory duties. Entering one door in the

morning, he said, are 3,500 head of cattle, which exit another door in the evening as store-ready meat. Once admitted, the cows are dropped by a pistol to the head, then decapitated and immediately jerked, hind legs first, into the air by a metal harness to drain the blood. In a second room they are skinned and boned before being sent to the freezers where Le Doyen and his wife work. There, excess fat is removed and the meat is sliced into consumer-ready cuts and packaged, before being conveyed out the other door into refrigerated trucks for delivery to retailers. It's a process in which every part of the animal is used, he said—meat, blood, hide, bones, even feces (this latter for use in fertilizer).

The work is hard and nonstop, meat on a belt—"you have to work fast, as the product keeps coming; you get only two breaks in ten hours; if you miss a beat, you'll be let go." "Have any Togolese been fired since you've been here?" "None. We've traveled too far and given up too much to not make the most of it."

I didn't hear any *Fast Food Nation*–like (Schlosser 2002) complaints of horrific work conditions and hyper-exploitation. To the contrary, those I spoke with seemed thankful to have a job that, at $12 an hour starting (with a dollar added each year), pays their bills and allows them to send money home, and enables them to earn as much in a day as entry-level civil servants back home make in a month. As full-time workers, they have health insurance with premiums of $12 a week, and they are often able to work overtime. (When Jeannot and I arrived in Moline on a Friday afternoon, we were unable to meet anyone until the next day because they were all working end-of-the-week time-and-a-half shifts and didn't get off until the early hours of the morning. At that point—1:00, 2:00, 3:00 a.m.—they all started returning Jeannot's calls.)

Of course, as Miraftab (2016) insightfully points out in her book on Beardstown—a meatpacking twin two hours from Moline, though one specializing in pork, not beef—the life of these workers is made possible, and financially sustainable, because the task of social reproduction, especially the care and cost of raising children, is often left to those back home. Only 30 percent of Togolese in her study had brought their children over, leaving childcare to those in Lomé. Such outsourcing, and the global inequalities it relies on, not only enables workers to get by on less but also creates workplace compliance: Togolese are willing and even grateful to work for minimum wage under difficult conditions because it is more than they can make back home.

There is of course an important labor story here, which I can only hint at. These new immigrants—"laboring nomads," Mbembe (2017, 3) has called them—have in many ways taken the place of the national proletariat. They rush to gobble up jobs that many in the white working class find below their pay scale (Miraftab 2016), before moving on when the pickings are better elsewhere. Are we not witnessing a new relationship between capital and labor in the making, not only a more compliant, albeit mobile, labor force—its mobility enabled by the presence of Togolese diasporic nodes across the country—but also an ethnically constituted one, with implications for worker solidarity and recruitment?

In thinking these new parameters, I am also intrigued by the idea that this hi-tech assembly line slaughter and vivisection is located within shouting distance of the Chicago stockyards of yore, the ones made infamous by Upton Sinclair ([1906] 2001)—stockyards that were also dependent on new immigrant labor. Is their difference—the apparently more humane working conditions today—dictated by technology in its contemporary iteration? Or by the social movements that Upton, and more recently Schlosser, begot? Or both, with the former resolving the crisis of the latter?

When I asked whether there were any workplace complaints, Le Doyen said that at the end of 2016 there was bitterness because the December bonuses they had become accustomed to were withdrawn, and each worker instead received a discount voucher to buy chicken—needless to say, Tyson chicken—at one of the local stores. They protested this cynical action by throwing their chickens on the steps of the manager's office. While the powers-that-be didn't appreciate the gesture, there were no apparent repercussions.

If work at Tyson Foods dominates the employment scene for Togolese in Moline, others we met worked at the furniture outlet, some in fast food, and several at Walmart; two drove eighteen-wheel trucks long distance. For Jeannot, the latter two were wonders of nature, examples of the sort of entrepreneurialism it takes, he insists, for Togolese to get ahead in the US. Both Kotokoli, a Muslim ethnicity in Togo's center that dominates long-distance bus and minivan travel, they first began working at Tyson; while there they saved their money and acquired commercial drivers' licenses on the side. After a year of driving for a trucking company and maintaining flawless records—the key to success, Jeannot insisted, in a business where 80 percent of drivers have accidents during the first year—they received a bank loan to buy their own truck. Now they hire themselves out, relaying one another,

each clocking seventy hours a week. The one we spent time with—in another of those cookie-cutter rental units with an immense TV dominating the living room—is only four years in and now makes $100,000 a year, and he is building a house back home. "A big success story," Jeannot concluded. "If only they were all like that. You have to take risks to be successful here. Otherwise you'll be locked into low-paying jobs forever."

Note that these Togolese pioneers rarely end up working in professions for which they qualified under the DV employment option. Indeed, I have never met a DV winner working in a job for which he or she was chosen for the visa. Nor do those who qualified with a high school diploma end up with work that is commensurate with their level of education. Most, including some I know who were bankers, teachers, or school principals back home, work in the US packing meat, sorting luggage at the airport, cleaning toilets in hotels, flipping burgers at McDonald's. A sad, even tragic, example of downward mobility and another instance of a DV system at odds with itself.

THE SMALL PENTECOSTAL church in Omaha was jumping. Behind a nondescript storefront, a beefy man in a blinding red suit and tie was leading prayers and songs, accompanied by three female vocalists with honeyed voices, each with palms raised skyward. Two electric guitars, drums, and a keyboard kept pace behind. The man's voice boomed, hitting all the right notes with operatic range and fullness, and the two hundred strong, many dressed in their finest Wax outfits, rose as one to exult in the presence of the Holy Spirit. It felt like Lomé.

Omaha is as flat as Moline, straight lines as far as the eye can see. Affectionately referred to by Togolese as "Togo-ville" or "Petit Togo," it has become a popular destination for Togolese in the diaspora. Its celebrity status owes to the fact that in the early 2000s it was easy to gain admission to one of the local universities, and the embassy in Lomé was acquiescent in granting student visas. Hundreds of Togolese applied and settled in Omaha (with many never even setting foot on campus because they lacked the means to pay for tuition). Instead they found jobs and eventually regularized their status by applying for political asylum, easy to get at the time because of the political impasse in Lomé. Once a node like this emerges, later arrivals follow—Kodjo now sends several DV selectees there each year—and Omaha is today a Grand Central on the Togolese map of the US.

As we took our seats, Jeannot leaned over and said that the man in the

electric suit, who was now pogo-sticking around the stage, had served as best man at his brother's wedding in Newark the year before, but that before entering the church that morning he had had no idea that the man now resided in Omaha. Such circulation between diasporic hubs is common as recent arrivals search for jobs and marital partners—and for conviviality. Perhaps this latter especially. It is not surprising that Togolese communities in the US reproduce all the same conflicts and antagonisms as those back home, of damaging gossip and occult worry, of marital indiscretion and betrayal, of ethnic rivalry and politics. (An acquaintance visiting the US on a tourist visa in 2016 spent a month making the rounds of Togolese friends along the East Coast and throughout the Midwest and told me he was surprised to find that Togolese ethnic politics, with its fierce north-south rivalry, seemed even more acrimonious in the US than back home. Indeed, Togolese politics—where one stands on the north-south divide—was often the first and last topic of conversation during Jeannot's and my visits with Togolese in the diaspora.[3])

The church seemed a refuge and sanctuary, the heartbeat of a community in an otherwise mechanical to-and-fro between home and work, a place to take the edge off difficult lives. A man Jeannot and I had met the day before said that life in the States for him was mostly "monotone." "We go from home to work and back again, and have little else in our lives. Unlike

you who are born here," gesturing at me, "we don't know where to go for enjoyment. All your centers of entertainment are American and we don't find them so interesting. And going out to eat, as you like to do, is expensive and comes with food we don't much like. Except for our football match on Saturday afternoon and church on Sunday, we usually just stay home."

The pastor was from Burkina Faso, a soft-spoken man with a direct but gentle gaze, the inverse twin of our boom box soloist. He commanded respect, I was told, because he spoke honestly in conveying God's word. He was a prophet, "a true man of God." He had come to the States, he told me after the service, on a student visa. After he got his degree, he went into the ministry, and today makes enough doing God's work to support his family.

Jeannot said later that it's better to have someone like him who is *not* Togolese as pastor—a pattern I had noticed in Lomé churches as well, where pastors often come from Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Nigeria, or Burkina Faso. "If he comes from elsewhere, the pastor shares little 'interest' with those in his congregation and he can administer to everyone equally. The outsider may also have spiritual powers we're not already familiar with that he can add to our own repertoire." Echoes here of the Stranger-King, the non-autochthone who becomes local sovereign (because he might be a less partial adjudicator), a popular political-theological motif throughout West Africa (Fortes 1945; Heusch 1982; Kraemer [1987] 1993) and beyond (Hocart 1927; Sahlins 1981, 2008; Dumézil 1988).

When the three-hour service was over, a dozen people stopped to greet me and Jeannot, and I seized the moment to conduct impromptu interviews, asking how they ended up in Omaha, where they worked, how long they had been here. Unlike in Moline, no single magnet enterprise like the Tyson meat plant drew in Togolese. Some did work in meatpacking but many worked elsewhere, in furniture factories, in fast food, as security guards, for a company called First Data that manufactures credit cards. And several had joined the US military, a vocation increasingly popular with Togolese men.[4] Its pay and benefits are big pulls, as is the prestige. Like driving long-distance trucks, the military is a profession that enables Togolese to leapfrog low-paying, low-status jobs that become destiny for many.[5]

The work profile of a friend of Kodjo's and Jeannot's in Omaha, who spent four years in the military and has placed several of Kodjo's clients in the army, expands the job resumes of Togolese in the US. He is a States-side version of the West African fixer, helping new arrivals get settled, finding lodging and work for them, helping them to obtain drivers' licenses and

A selfie with Jeannot.

identity cards. He and Kodjo have a small patronage society—you help me, I'll help you—that enables Kodjo to find placements in the States for clients (while feeding them into the Omaha big man's network and sphere of influence) and to recoup potential losses back home from clients who renege. When an Omaha lottery winner of Kodjo's who was delinquent in reimbursing him decided to return to Lomé for a visit, his Omaha partner alerted him to her imminent arrival. The well-connected Kodjo notified a security agent at the airport, who confiscated her passport and told her he would not return it until she had settled her debt. The gambit worked: she quickly paid Kodjo, received her passport, and left for Omaha. Kodjo's return gift to his business partner: he married a male winner to the Omaha man's younger sister in order to bring her to the States.

One of the more charming moments Jeannot and I spent in Omaha was with three male clients of Kodjo's, all in their early twenties, all recent arrivals from northern Togo: one four months in, another two months, the third only a few weeks. We met them on a Saturday afternoon at their apartment—still bare bones, no furniture except mattresses on the floor and a cheap table in the kitchen—and took them to McDonald's, their first time ever. Wide-eyed and full of anticipation—they had all dressed in handsome shirts, as if for church—they were nevertheless not shy in criticizing the food. "Not to

my taste," said the most recent arrival as he picked at a chicken burger, "and not very filling." A satisfying meal for Togolese consists of a melon-sized corn-, sorghum-, or yam-based starch accompanied by a succulent sauce that lines the stomach and announces when you've had your fill.

Our conversation ranged from first impressions—despite the unsatisfying meal at McDonald's, they were flush with first romance, imagining the world at their feet—to Jeannot playing the old-timer, offering advice about the hazards of Togolese experience in the States and how to get ahead. He was especially critical of compatriots who risked nothing, remaining for years in the same low-paying jobs they took when they first arrived, and worse, insulting those who take chances trying to get ahead (because their success will mean that others fall back in the prestige hierarchy), invoking the image of crabs in a barrel. His advice to these newbies: work for a year or two to pay off debts back home, take English classes at night, then pursue a degree at a local community college. "Doors will open for you. This is a country of entrepreneurs. If you have an adventurous spirit, you'll succeed. But you need credentials as well. Go to school and don't delay in acquiring English competency."

He offered himself as an example of risk-taking that had led to advantage. When he first moved to Raleigh, he borrowed money for a down pay-

ment to purchase a foreclosed house sold through HUD, and covered the mortgage with the small salaries he and his wife made cleaning rental cars for AVIS and doing assembly line work at a computer factory. After a year, the value of the house had increased 30 percent, and he took out a second mortgage, which provided him with enough cash to add a HUD-foreclosed apartment to his holdings. Today, he uses the rent from the apartment to cover the mortgage on the house. Meanwhile, the apartment's value has increased threefold. Jeannot also attended night school so that he could get his draftsman's license, then landed a job that paid him $50,000 a year. "All of my Togolese friends advised against purchasing this house and discouraged me from going to school. Now they're envious."

Indeed, although many of his ventures have ended in failure, Jeannot's reputation as a risk-taker is legendary and his job itinerary dizzying. When he first arrived in the States, he spent a year in Newark working at the airport before finding employment alongside other Togolese at a fish factory. After moving to North Carolina, he cleaned rental vehicles, delivered pizzas and newspapers, sold jeans at local flea markets, raised collector pythons in his basement, drove for Amazon home delivery, worked at the computer plant and as a draftsman, and auditioned as a truck driver.

He then set his sights farther afield and began importing Chinese aluminum to Ghana, heavy vehicles obtained at rural auctions in the US to Lomé, hair braids made in Korea and Kenya to the US[6]—each time breaking even but never realizing the large returns he hoped for. He also hatched a scheme with an American company to chemically compact dirt roads, giving them longer life, and conducted a successful trial run at the Ministry of Public Works in Lomé. After promising to give Jeannot a contract, the Minister instead slipped the idea to a younger brother in California and awarded that brother the contract. "This is what we face when we attempt to return home—and this is why Togo is still so far behind," Jeannot said with contempt.

In spring 2017 he purchased seven hundred refrigerator "returns" from an online clearing house, Liquidated.com, at bargain-basement cost and shipped them to Lomé in three large containers. He sold them in an open-air market on the outskirts of Lomé, making a $200 profit per unit ($140,000 total). At the same time, he shipped twenty-five late-model cars he had acquired at fire-sale prices through online auctions—body-damaged "accident" vehicles that had been repossessed by insurance companies but whose engines were still immaculate. Instead of having the bodywork done in the

States, which would have been exorbitant, he waited until the wrecks arrived in Lomé, then contracted the repair work out for a fraction of the cost ($200 each), and made a $6,000 profit per vehicle.

Kodjo drifts in and out of our conversation with the three new arrivals. They were all plucked midair by his latest recruitment strategy through which a photographer at the university takes their photos and gathers their personal information for the lottery at the same time that he takes pictures for student IDs at fall registration. Despite the mana-from-on-high nature of the appointment and the apprehension that DV selectees often experience when they are called on to substitute one set of futures for another, they were ever grateful to Kodjo for the opportunity and for services rendered along the way. "He bought our tickets, he told us what to expect at the embassy interview, and he introduced us to our sponsor in Omaha."

"The embassy in Lomé should give Kodjo an award," Jeannot interjected. "Look at the work he does for them. They've created an immigration system but he's the one who spreads the word and signs people up. It's a scheme to diversify the US population but he's the only one who diversifies the pool of Togolese applicants by signing up northerners; otherwise, only southerners would apply. He helps applicants and winners fill out their documents and pay their pre-departure immigrant fee. He buys their plane tickets. Then he helps them find jobs and a place to stay in the States."

There's an important truth in what Jeannot says. What kind of modern state, especially a powerful and wealthy one like the United States, would create a system for immigrants then abandon them to their own devices, expecting the immigrants to put themselves through the paces and foot the entire bill? Why do we treat legal migrants different from refugees, for whom the state finds housing and work, and provides financial support for eight months?[7] Why this insidious distinction between refugee and migrant?

DESPITE THE FACT that all DV winners have papers, Trump's election cut into them like a sharp knife. The transition from Obama—not only the first black president but also the first "African" US president—to the white supremacist Trump was unthinkable, against all that they thought the US stood for. "Is the country really racist like that?" several commented. "Does he really hate all immigrants? We thought this was an immigrant nation, one that welcomed people from all over the world. Was that not the spirit of the visa lottery?"

The moment was so toxic for Togolese in the US that they worried their papers would no longer be respected. In Moline and Raleigh, I met DV green card holders who had returned to Lomé for the 2016–2017 holidays, but fearing the worst, hurried back to the States before Trump's inauguration at the end of January. Others, also in possession of a green card, sacrificed long-planned trips home because they thought they might not be allowed back in. One of Kodjo's winners in northern Togo decided to forego the embassy interview, saying that she heard rumors that Trump was against the DV Lottery and she didn't want to throw her money away.

The panic among the African immigrant community in the US was palpable, a type of "terrorism" in its own right. One I spoke to said, "It's Trump who is the terrorist. He imagines his policies will keep bad people out, but he's the one who is creating more terror in this country than any outsider."

All those I spoke to know, and often live cheek-by-jowl with, immigrants without papers or those waiting for papers, suspended between one status and another. The Trump era has driven them into a state of fear and paranoia, adding a new, even more debilitating "psychosis" to their emotional patina. They now live lives largely cloistered and clandestine; they're often afraid to go out in public, afraid to drive cars lest they be stopped by the police, afraid to take public transportation—especially airplanes, as they worry that the TSA, now repurposed from fighting terrorism to fingering undocumented immigrants, might identify and deport them. Criminalized, they live as outlaws, a status that governs every intimacy of their daily lives.

Moreover, the consequences of Trump-ism go beyond documentation and its travails. For many, the elimination or reduction of Medicaid would be a catastrophic health event. Most of those in the Togolese immigrant community, including those *with* documents, are unable to purchase their own health insurance, do not work for companies that insure their employees, or both, and they rely on Medicaid, especially for their children. "Some of our children will go untreated and may die because of this policy," Jeannot said.

I asked several of those we met during our sojourns whether they had experienced racism in the US. Surprisingly perhaps, most said that they had not and often felt more at odds with African Americans than white Americans.[8] At the same time, some admitted to mild workplace discrimination, mainly others being promoted ahead of them, which they thought might be because of their race. Here, it is important to keep in mind that for West Africans back home race is not a go-to category. Ethnicity and gender are

categories that divide, but not race—and how could it, in a society that is, as Togolese say, "monochrome"?[9] But their lack of racial consciousness is also surely because Togolese—and probably most immigrants to the US—keep their heads down, work hard, pay their bills, and stay out of trouble. "We've come too far and given up too much to risk anything here."

Their great fear today, however, is that under Trump the US has turned a new page, with anti-immigrant racism and the murk of US race politics the new order of the day—and their new lot.

MY FIRST TRIP WITH Jeannot was to Newark to visit Togolese he lived with when he first landed in the States. It was a Saturday afternoon and we drove from the airport to a verdant park downtown, a luminous green in the midst of the concrete-and-steel city, reminding me of the small epiphany I always experienced in St. Louis as a child when I entered Busch Memorial Stadium from the street to witness anew that baseball temple's manicured green. Several hundred DV winners and their families had gathered for the weekly soccer match. The men played while their wives and children watched and gossiped. Bodies floated across the turf, touch and run, the younger, fitter ones showing their agility, the older ones conceding their age. As with the church in Omaha, this gathering seemed soulful and restorative, an oasis at the end of a long week's Saharan travails.

For Jeannot it was a homecoming of sorts. He greeted old friends warmly amid much teasing about receding hairlines and protruding stomachs, and he waxed nostalgic as we drove around familiar streets, pointing out old haunts, including the large three-story brick building—*La Grande Maison*—where he had lived with other Togolese when he first arrived. It was a semi-communal space, six rooms parsed among eighteen recent arrivals, all sharing a common kitchen and often eating together. His joy at visiting old stomping grounds and reconnecting with friends, however, was tempered by the recognition that he had made the right choice in moving on and by the salient reminder that he had been criticized by many of these same friends for dreaming big and trying to rise above his station.

Jeannot's strong impression was that, ten years later, little had changed. Many were still working in the fish factory and at the airport,[10] still making minimum wage, forever scrambling to make ends meet. When the US economy was strong in the early 2000s, they were able to save more, especially those working at the airport, where tips boosted their take-home pay,

and several began to build houses back home. But 2008 changed all that and today they barely get by, with many Lomé "projects" stalled midstream.

The sad plight of those in Newark spoke truth to Jeannot's claim that if you don't attempt to break out of the immigrant enclave by taking risks, you will likely remain stuck for years, perhaps the rest of your working life. As Francophone West Africans, Togolese lack the linguistic and cultural literacy to climb the job hierarchy and often remain slotted into minimum-wage jobs, struggling to both pay the bills and send money home. Moreover, they rue their downward mobility; many left professional jobs in Togo and now find themselves cleaning toilets in hotels and rental cars at airports.

Of those we met in Newark, there were two notable success stories. One, Jeannot's younger brother, who arrived with skills as a welder, joined the union and landed a job reinforcing the undersides of New York City bridges, hanging from the buttresses. Dangerous work, and with a short lifespan (an imposed ceiling of forty years of age), he nevertheless made a handsome $45 an hour (and double that on weekends). With his earnings he was able to buy a house on a quiet suburban street and fill it with upscale furniture and the largest TV screen I had seen in any of the homes we visited. (It should not be surprising that this fantasy machine everywhere comes to mark West African immigrants' arrival in the land of their dreams. Is it not Hollywood and American TV that conquered the world with its imaginary—its modern fantasies replacing the old ceremonial verities—and created precedent for something like the allure of the DV Lottery?)

As his children scampered up and down the stairs to the second floor and his wife offered an ivory mound of fufu with fish sauce, he talked about the good fortune he had had in finding work while nevertheless remaining mindful of the risks of a job in which you are suspended by a harness all day hundreds of feet above water and pavement. His sanguine view of life in the US was buttressed by several untoward experiences he had had in trying to build a house back home, instances of massive betrayal by family members. He first sent money to a younger brother to buy land for his house, only to later discover that the plot had also been sold to two others. (Such stories of double and triple sale—of land with "many authors," as Jeannot put it—are famous in Lomé today, but he didn't know whether he'd been taken by a stranger or a sibling, adding salt to his wounds.) He tried again, now sending money to two siblings, imagining that one might serve as a check against the other. They notified him when they had purchased the land and again when they began house construction. Then, during an unannounced visit

to Lomé, he discovered that it was all a sham, that no such land or house existed and that they were each building their own houses—with his money.

Stories of duplicity back home are fabled and circulate widely in the diaspora. One particularly grievous instance involved a young woman's attempt to avoid untrustworthy family members by sending money to her pastor instead. After paying for the land and approving blueprints for the house, she was regularly informed by the pastor about the progress being made on house construction. Five years later, she returned to Lomé to behold her dream house, only to discover that she'd been had by this man of the cloth—that no land or house existed in her name and that he denied ever having been sent money to build such a house. "Even pastors can 419 you," she announced ruefully.[11]

In each Togolese entrepôt Jeannot and I visited—Newark, Omaha, Moline, Raleigh—building a house back home was everyone's gold standard. This cultural project, which Togolese refer to as "avoir un projet au pays" (having a project back home), captures the imaginations of not only Togolese but also diasporic West Africans more broadly. All the large coastal cities—Accra, Lagos, Cotonou, Abidjan, Lomé—are bursting with houses and neighborhoods under construction, bankrolled by those in the diaspora—houses that often take years to complete because bank loans for house building are hard to come by and cash in hand is a requisite.[12] These retirement homes thus inch up, first an enclosure, then a foundation, then a few cement walls, then a completed first story, sometimes a second story, with years, even decades, going by before they are finished. The esteem these concrete signifiers possess owes to their double message: on the one hand, materializing emigrant desire to return home, and on the other, indexing apparent success abroad to those left behind.

The other luminous success was that of another Kotokoli, the Togolese ethnicity famous for producing long-distance drivers. He drove large trucks from New York to California for five years before sending for his family and buying a house in Newark. He retired from truck driving after his eighteen-wheeler went off the road in the Colorado mountains in winter—during which, he told me, he saw his life pass before his eyes as he shouted prayers to Allah—and he now works as a dispatcher at the airport. We met him there on a Sunday morning and chatted curb-side between taxi arrivals, dodging luggage and passengers jack-knifing in and out of cabs. His English skills were strong and he was clearly good at his work. He too was upbeat about life in the US, claiming that he had accomplished his dream: "There

are opportunities here that we don't have back home; I grew up in poverty and know what it means to struggle." And rare among Togolese I have encountered in the States, he had little desire to return home.

A STORY STARTED TO form as we made the rounds. Despite some clear successes—the welder and the truck driver in Newark, the pair of drivers in Moline, the army enlistees in Omaha and Fayetteville, Jeannot—and despite the fact that all I met are making a living and sending money home, disappointment and pathos, and a sense of sacrifice and deferral, thread the narratives of Togolese in the US. With rare exception, those I spoke to said they would return home tomorrow if they could only make a living. They miss the food, the laughter and the language that add melody to the streets and markets, and of course, despite the betrayals, their family and friends. Personal attachments in Togo are thick, perhaps thicker than elsewhere (and certainly more so than in the US), and they miss that density of relationship and the command of repertoire that accompany it: the protocols, the obligations, the hierarchies of respect.

A friend told me that as soon as he arrives back in Lomé, "I feel at ease—within minutes." In the States, he said, he is anxious all the time and never fully in his skin. Five years out, now working as a teacher—and thus with advantages many Togolese emigrants lack—he has his mind set on returning home when he retires and is now working hard toward that future by saving monthly toward building a house where he and his family will live.

"Aux Etats-Unis, je gagne, mais je ne vis pas" (In the US, I make a living but I don't have a life) was an expression I heard more than once. Or the same sentiment in a different idiom: that life for Togolese in the US is not much more than a mechanical back-and-forth between home and work, with little to sweeten the hardship. Indeed, Jeannot, for all his apparent success and adventurism, said he will never feel fully at home in the US and aims to return to Togo with his family in the next five years. I saw his wife a few years ago in Lomé—she had returned for the December holidays—and she seemed the happiest person alive. On the day of her departure to the States, tears rained down her cheeks. "I don't want to leave," she whispered. But of course she had to.

A puzzle for me in parsing the logic of these longings and deferrals is that those in the diaspora are unable to speak their unhappiness back

home, or more, to suggest that others might want to reconsider before leaving. I was told again and again: If they spoke the truth, who would believe them? Those in Lomé see the money returning each month and the houses going up. They watch television nightly, imagining the filmic version of life in Europe and the US as normative and available to all. "If you try to tell them that life there is not the way they dream it, they won't believe you and they will wonder what you're hiding from them. As a consequence, the truth of our lives in the United States remains a secret to everyone back home."

By this telling, it is those at home as much as or more than those who have departed who keep the dream alive—the fantasy that in the US money falls from trees. They insist on the upbeat version of life in the diaspora and refuse the dystopic one. Is it not because those on the street in Lomé, more than those in the diaspora, need the fantasy of an elsewhere—a place and a time of salvation—that the visa lottery offers in order to endure precarious lives? In a double gesture, they project desire onto compatriots who have escaped while also giving voice to their plight at home. But I read this not so much as a politics of denial or false consciousness as an attempt to keep center stage their own exclusion from the global. The DV Lottery may not be the invention of the Togolese street, but it could have been, as it congeals and condenses all the desires of that street—for a different and better future, for a life after precarity, for a place in the world (Ferguson 1999, 2002, 2006; Makhulu, Buggenhagen, and Jackson 2010).

Moreover, a second deception that further serves notice to the impossibility of unmasking the first: when those in the diaspora return for short visits, they perform success, often dramatically so. They rent flashy cars, stay in upscale apartments, bankroll nights on the town with friends, and bestow lavish gifts on family members. These are the same minimum-wage workers Jeannot and I met in Newark and Moline and Omaha, those who otherwise struggle to make ends meet. Adding privation to penury, they curtail desires in the US in order to put on a "show" when they return, as if they were astonishing success stories.

There is of course something deeply compensatory or psychoanalytic about this hustle, this staging of success after years of waiting and deferral, this face-saving pleasure-for-an-instant that stands in for an incommodious life. But before dismissing too quickly this performance as another example of self-delusion, we ought to recognize that it not only offers consolation for a life of hardship abroad and provides a reprieve from the heaviness of heart

that attends daily life in the US; it also is a way of keeping hope alive, for themselves and the larger collectivity. These are dreams to live by.

When I have asked Togolese in the diaspora whether it has all been worth it and whether they would do it again, many respond stoically but without complaint by saying they didn't have a choice. "It was our destiny to be chosen by this lottery, and there's no going back." They then often add, "We do it for our children. In Togo, parents have a single hope for their children, that they will lead better lives than their parents. We know that our children will live the dream that we are unable to."

And indeed many of these children *will* succeed in the US. The children of DV winners acquire cultural literacy and English fluency from the start, and many become high achievers in school, often getting into the best colleges, because Togolese parents know discipline and they insist that their children achieve in school: "We've come too far to not succeed."

A silver lining perhaps, but also, in the end, one more deferral—not for me, for my children—for those who have given up so much to live out a brilliant, if fraught and inchoate, fantasy.