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# Setting Out (Again): Ethnographic Deliverance in Malawi

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Committee in charge:

Professor Nancy Scheper-Hughes, Chair
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Abstract

Setting Out (Again): Ethnographic Deliverance in Malawi

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The following is an experimental work of anthropology in the form of an *ethnovella*, a work informed from experiences that brought me to the field site for my dissertation research, a relatively small Pentecostal-charismatic ministry in Southern Malawi in 2011-2012. It takes seriously the ethical and epistemological demand made upon all persons who enter Pentecostal-charismatic scenes in search of breakthroughs: namely, to submit themselves narratively in the form of testimony as a precondition for the kind of inquiry generated within the space of the congregation. In doing so, it interrogates presumptions made with regard to ethnographic practice and representation, demonstrating that a work of anthropology can sometimes operate alongside ethnography. Ultimately a non-linear, narrative performance that attempts to evoke an ontology of deliverance that an ethnography to come will hope to enunciate, this dissertation relies on memory and creativity to account for an ethnographic fiction, in the truest sense of the term. At a moment in the discipline when new forms and accounts are finally being offered their place in the long wake of a crisis of representation, this dissertation is a contribution to fresh experiments in ethnographic writing (e.g., Pandian and McLean, eds. 2017) within the context of a revitalized anthropology of becoming (e.g., Biehl and Locke, eds. 2017), one which attempts to express what I have referred to elsewhere as “the joyfulness in prefiguration’ (Price 2016). In this regard, the work is, like most works of anthropology, provisional—only more radically so, by design.

In loving memory of
Annie Botha & Eunice Chaheka

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## preface

In "Setting Out," the opening chapter of *Tristes Tropiques* (1955), Claude Lévi-Strauss laments the amount of energy and expenditure wasted in reaching the objects of our studies. He hates travelers and explorers, is burdened with shame and despair, and reckons the world will greet our feeble endeavors at ethnography with complete indifference. Written from memory, with a sense of loss carrying it through, *Tristes* can be as elusive and solemn as its famous sunset. What might we gain from revisiting this mix of confessional literature and ethnography in a time so explicitly marked by capitalist ruin, cruel optimism, precarity, duress, and trouble? What can we do with ethnography in a world where subjectivity and entropy are no longer revealed and discovered, but prefigured and trumpeted? How, as ethnographers, are we to transform? What, as anthropologists, are we meant to transmit?

I have set out for Malawi a handful of times. I have intended to set out for Malawi another handful of times, and failed. Each time I sit down to write about this place, I set out. Each time I sit down to write about this place, I fail. This happens again and again; but this is not a failure. Nabokov once said that there is no reading but only re-reading. Every page, an invitation to set out. Every page an invitation to meet without meeting in a space that is no place other than somewhere in between a here and a there. These are vital spaces—difficult to make, and sometimes even more difficult to maintain. T.O. Beidelman called anthropology a tragic discipline because of the isolation and alienation that it conferred onto its practitioners (1993: 214). Franz Boas saw it as a mode of freedom (1940: 636). Jane Guyer (2009) and David Graeber (2007) have talked about possibility. They are all correct, of course. All this coming and going can be life affirming but, like everything else, it takes its toll. What to make of this movement? What to make of reenactment in spite of failure? Is all this turning and re-turning merely running in place? And if so, why qualify it with a word like "merely"? In Malawi, a common greeting is: "*Zikuyenda*?" Are things moving? "*Zikuyenda*." Yes, they are. It is important to keep things moving, to keep entropy in abeyance—regardless of the returns. The point is to create anachrony, Walter Benjamin (1968) has said, of movement. (Perhaps, too, for ethnography…)

My research with Pentecostal and charismatic Christian congregants in Southern Malawi suggests that a great achievement and attraction of

emergent/insurgent ministries is their capacity to keep people moving—to set out (again and again), terrain be damned.

"Set out" usually means to begin a journey—to aim or intend to do something. But it can also refer to the putting, laying, or standing of something in a specified place or position. Other meanings suggest the mechanics of representation, establishment, arrangement, and adjustment. (You can set a table, for example, in so much as you can set a course.)

This leaves open the possibility of at least two readings of Lévi-Strauss' opening chapter title in *Tristes*. The first signals the beginning of a journey with particular aims and intensions. The second signals the process of rendering that journey through the laying down of words into an arrangement whose intention might not be as clear as its initial embarkation (and whose lack of clear intention may be a condition of its very arrival).

The essay which follows "Setting Out (Again)," is, to some extent, inspired by *Tristes*. The title can also be read in two ways: the first, signaling the commencement of a genre exercise normative in the long wake of *Writing Culture* (1986) (but, in this case, taken to an almost absurdist extreme); and the second, foreshadowing the kind of re-turn that becomes essential to an appreciation of born-again (-and again) life.

What followed in writing, however, was unexpected—for it was never my intention to write a non-linear, 30,000 word, semi-fictional, stream-of-conscious account of a journey from armchair to field that incorporates scraps and fragments of ancillary writing composed from the second-person point of view—a mode of writing that, I think (or perhaps I hope), angles toward, ironically, a desubjectification of not only the ethnography, but also of the ethnographer—culminating in a kind of "ethnographic deliverance" (an inversion of the "ethnographic sorcery" (2007) Harry West has written of on the Mueda plateau in northern Mozambique).

This was unexpected, unconventional, but ultimately welcome, since, for the longest time, I had been stuck—unable (or unwilling) to write the world I had experienced in Malawi in a mix of first and third person point of views, and then arranged in discrete chapters that build toward a central set of claims with interludes invoked as a means of sampling/indexing the excess of things. I tried to do this, again-and-again, but all of my efforts fell flat. In short, I felt cursed.

It was only when I began to play with other modes of writing that things started moving. In retrospect, considering what I was writing about (and why) this

was entirely reasonable, since, I would argue, Pentecostal and charismatic spaces have become venues for what Achille Mbembe has called "African modes of self-writing"(2001)—procedures in which "the aesthetics of predation and hoarding" (2001: 32) are captured, mimed, and distorted in attempts to come to terms with "economies of unsatisfied desires," (2001: 31) in order to transcend "the pathos of victimization" (2001: 22) in the service of re-territorializing identity *not* in homes, but in the house of God where subjects can wage not worldly warfare with fellow citizens, but spiritual warfare with demons in an art practice of cruelty and grace that ultimately generates what I argue is the miracle of motive force (or, what I hope to label, "DURA," in an ethnography to come). This mode of writing is not condensed or linear in its composition, nor does it presume a passive audience. (In fact, it all but mandates an active one.) There is heteroglossia that incorporates glossolalia, words-and-sentenced based ways of knowing entangled with image-and-sequence based ways of knowing, along with a generalized charismatic emphasis on nonmaterial materialities. It is a mode of writing focused on the generation of feelings of renewal, not necessarily on intellectual coherence and consistency. But—and this is key—this does *not* mean it is not rigorous.

Pentecostal-charismatic modes of writing may not be rigorous in the intellectual sense of being extremely accurate and precise, but they *are* often rigorous in the medical sense of having a sudden feeling of cold with shivering, accompanied by a rise in temperature, often with copious sweating at the onset of fever. This premonition of death does not signal the passing of the principal author, the congregant herself, but the impending demise of the alien within—the demon—who has attempted to hijack the script endowed upon the subject by God. This physical embodiment of rigor, therefore, represents the very condition under which rebirth and renewal can be actualized. (Something I failed to access in my own writing for years.)

When I finally did realign my standards and expectations of rigor with that of my interlocutors—things began to move.

In an interview, the novelist Elena Ferrante (2015) was asked how she began a new work. She said she couldn't say precisely, that "there is a before, made up of fragments of memory, and an after, when the story begins."

In "Setting Out," Lévi -Strauss laments the amount of energy and expenditure wasted in reaching our objects. But, as *Tristes* attests, it *is* useful—and put to real use in the text (one of the wonderful ironies of the account).

In most contemporary fieldwork, we are often not arriving but returning. And often, this is again-and-again. What if these energies and expenditures are some of our greatest tools? What if these memories are useful—not only in terms of rhetoric or datum, but also at the level of method?

"The word *frantumaglia*," according to Ferrante (2015), refers to "bits and pieces of uncertain origin which rattle around in your head, not always comfortably."

My first field notebook for this project was a receptacle for uncomfortable rattlings. I initially disregarded it as improper datum, returning to it only when I was in need of a new beginning, when I was stuck.

The first entry there, written from a window seat on a plane on route to a place that I did not know would become my field site read, as if to prefigure what would come next (and what had come before):

*Not as I pictured it to be. Gap between real and ideal. No romance in this, only reaction and pragmatism in the face of error and a field of constraint. We piece it all together in retrospect. Stick together the floating pieces and scraps.*

In my attempt to contextualize this particular scrap, I set out to describe, quite straightforwardly, my journey from armchair to field. But the narrative unfolded inside of itself, weaving back and forth in time and space in an almost unconscious attempt to account for all the comings and goings that lead to that particular passage.

Curiously, it was a movement only made possible by deploying the second person point of view—a shift that seemed to arise of its own accord.

Many have dabbled in the second person, of course. Gao Xingjian (2000), Italo Calvino (1981), and Edoard Léve (2011) are three examples off my bookshelf.

In anthropology, there is, of course, Bronislaw Malinowski's famous second-person incantation in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922).

More recently, Robert Desjarlais has deployed the device in two ethnographies: *Counterplay* (2011) and *Subject to Death* (2016).

In her review of the latter, Sarah Pinto (2016) points out that, "the second-person pushes against the mistake of nihilism that might come from mishandling the Buddhist principle of no-self and, similarly, from post-modern invocations of selves as performance and the relative nature of truths." And while I agree with Pinto that the second-person may only work in certain situations, I would contest that the invocation of selves as performance and the relative nature of truth is not entirely postmodern, and that the second person can grant access to a

performative space that produces a rather modernist form of self-critical capacity with undertones of less-relative conceptions of truth.

In addition to the second-person, I found myself incorporating the non-diegetic fragments of ancillary writing that were reshaping the narrative as it unspooled from outside the text. This is unconventional, but it felt right, maybe because this is a similar method of integration to that of the church—a form of writing meant to invigorate, expel, preserve, and ultimately to heal (at least for a time). And that is precisely what it did for me.

But while it did accelerate the writing, it also slowed down the narrative—fracturing and decentering not only the figure of the lone ethnographer, but also the ethnography itself. Is an ethnography that does not move by the force of argumentation but elliptically on its own accord the kind of form *Tristes* would have taken were Lévi-Strauss to have set off a hundred years later?

Of Robert Walser, W.G. Sebald noted: "Indeed, the detour is, for Walser, a matter of survival… it is precisely [his] linguistic montages—emerging as they do from the detours and digressions of narrative and, especially, of form—which are most at odds with the demands of high culture. Their associations with nonsense poetry and the word salad symptomatic of schizophasia were never likely to increase the market value of their author" (2015: 189).

Indeed—as detour lead to detour, the specter of market value haunted me/haunts me. Mbembe was correct when he said that "through constant repetition, a set of… dogmas and empty dreams [can be] ultimately imposed on common sense" (2001: 2). But if I learned anything at the ministry where I conducted my fieldwork, it was that the best way to retrieve common sense from common sense was by meeting constant repetition with constant repetition, which is precisely why I think I felt free to continue writing, to continue re-turning.

The secret is not as important as the paths that led me to it.
— Jorge Luis Borges, “The Ethnographer”

**setting out (again)**

Through the breezeway, over the bridge, and in through the nose of the plane, you stumble into first class and see him standing there. How do you know this man? Long orange face, double-chinned, with an aquiline nose and shape-shifting eyes. Was it the Football Association? The Ministry of Health? The Ministry of Education? Maybe the mental hospital? (And if so, which ward?) Or could it have been the university? (And if so, which college?) It certainly wasn't from your time in the Viphya. (There were so few *mwenyes* up there anyway.) That was over a decade ago—so much has changed since then.

"Yunus? Yunus Mussa?" you shout.

He is standing in the middle of the aisle in a mute mustard suit. You will note, moments later, that he was examining his smart phone with one hand, while thumbing the inside rim of his brown leather belt with the other; that the overhead compartment above him was open; and that his luggage appeared to idle there (as if "suspended in a web of its own meaning"). Does any of this matter? (You wonder now.) You suspect that it does, hope that it will. The first passage of your first entry in your first field notebook (for this project). You return to it when there is nowhere else to go, when everything else has failed, when you need a new beginning. ("Read these," you tell yourself, "read these again.")

He looks up after hearing your voice but he clearly doesn't recognize you. He smiles anyway—a tentative, sinewy, diplomatic smile. You move toward him, extend your hand, and say, "Tasty Bites!"

This is strange; he is puzzled.

Tasty Bites is a cream-colored roadside restaurant specializing in chicken and chips that sits on a root-strewn plot along the M5 just outside Zomba City Center across the road from an old Petroda filling station.

A popular lunch spot, the restaurant caters to expats and elites, but it is by no means exclusive (nothing in Zomba really has been since the capital moved to Lilongwe in 1975). You know the place well, have spent many hours reading your books, writing your notes, scheduling meetings, and drinking your coffee there.

A good place to work—in particular because they have a reliable, well-stocked generator. And with the increase in power outages, anyone in Malawi with the ambition to work into the evening (outside a flame's radius, of course) has been left scrambling for power. Load shedding has become so regular and consequential, in fact, that it appears now in the daily newspapers (as if it were a new dimension of the weather). Allegedly something to do with years of accumulated biomass stalling hydroelectric turbines in the Lower Shire, you can't help but imagine a nameless bureaucrat in a nondescript room, jacked up on export quality Chombe Tea, gleefully flicking switches, mostly at random, from sunset to sunrise. Though such an articulation does as much to help the situation as the litany of social media posts excoriating ESCOM in the wake of another outage, at least it distracts you from the moral obligation to participate in public discourse regarding the tiresome cockfight developing between USAID and the Mutharika administration about the transnational funding of infrastructure maintenance in light of "millennium development goals" set, in part, as a means of warding off fresh incursions made by Chinese state actors keen on establishing durable, under the table, quid pro quo relations as a means of gaining access to long-term speculative land rights that might ultimately yield the mineral resources necessary to power the next generation of essential technologies—like your laptop, which, at the end of the day (literally), you'll have to power if you want to continue working into the night; and so this is why you often stay at Tasty Bites as long as you possibly can, and why you sometimes even help close the place down in exchange for a lift back to your room in the post/colonial foothills (regardless of what your interlocutors may believe, you simply don't have the budget for a rental car or regular taxi service).

There is a routine to this: once the floors are swept and the dishes done, the accounts registered and the food sealed away, the green light is given to shut down the generator (a moment when the heavy quiet and light darkness of the hithertofore absent evening is suddenly *unveiled*—a moment that never ceases to catch you, a moment that signifies nothing). Two members of staff then remove the machine from its out-of-the-way place along the wall outside the restaurant beneath the blue gum that marks the boundary between it and the old colonial golf course out back. Should the moonlight be insufficient, they'll light the way with little torches on mobile phones that have been faithfully charged in out-of-the-way places around the restaurant throughout the day in advance of the dawning nighttime hours when off-peak rates will open a window where they can afford to meaningfully reconnect with family, friends, patrons, lovers, and the

like. (So much depends on the night.) Rounding the corner, they'll climb a small flight of stairs, tuck the generator just inside the restaurant, wipe their hands clean, and then join the rest of the staff in the company mini-van waiting out front. Trying not smoke, Max will be last to leave. He'll lock a series of doors and gates, greet the night guard, climb into the driver's seat, turn the ignition, steer the wheel toward the M5, follow it for a few hundred meters, then turn left at the traffic light, and shoot down the expanse—past the central mosque, past the central market, past the Chinese stores, then the PTC (the mad and homeless tucked beneath blankets on cold cracked concrete slabs out front), past the bus stage (slowly overloading its night buses bound for Lilongwe, Mzuzu and beyond), past the primary school with the Africa map made in painted stones and bricks out front, past the animal emergency, and then the water board, before keeping right at the police academy turnoff, making a left at the night market, and finally crossing the concrete bridge into the townships below. A subtle transition. Video shows flicker, bottle shop bass bins beat, bodies cross, weaving themselves around vehicles like yours which move through the terrain like a cold stream in a thick wood. Each time the van swerves left or right to avoid some fissure or depression in the road, a fresh array of figures in time and space is revealed. A drunk, a schoolboy, a mother, a father. Someone's son or someone's daughter, someone's pastor or someone's teacher. The teller at the bank, a security guard at ADMARC, the butcher at the market, a soldier from Cobbe Barracks (who may or may not have once been a great footballer, and who may or may not now dream of being assigned to a peace-keeping mission in Darfur because this is the one way he can foresee the chance to afford an investment in a new house just north of town in a nice new development colloquially named after the beleaguered conflict zone). People called Madalitso and Chikosa, Tiffany and Chiwoza, with surnames like Banda and Munthali, Sibande and Gondwe—each name a signal you register, but are unlikely to trace (as times have changed and their futures seem more pertinent than their past). They carry bags, instruments, tools, and groceries. They hold ears of maize, tubers of cassava, and sticks of sugarcane. They are empty-handed, strolling toward their destination (should they have one) alone (or hand-in-hand). Each moment a movement conceivable and inconceivable, revocable and irrevocable, unlikely to be captured, let alone interrogated … *A blessing and a curse,* you think, as Singo, who is generally last to leave the minivan, bounds out the sliding side door, waving goodbye frenetically as he melts into the scene, leaving you and Max alone in the automobile with ten-to-fifteen minutes remaining to climb out of the townships, pass back through the

Boma, and turn up toward the vaulted security of leafy Masongola where neatly pressed beds await you behind locked doors—each fitted with wires connected to generators on the one end and private security forces stationed in the space in between on the other, where trucks, armed men, and hungry dogs wait for the signal. Grateful for the lift, you wish Max a good evening, and pass your greetings onto Fatima and his parents.

"Good night Jason, see you tomorrow."

"Good night Max. Sleep well."

Max is the proprietor of Tasty Bites; a second or third generation Indian Malawian, he is married to Fatima, a second or third generation Indian Mozambican. Like so many other things, you forget how they met.

Max is often stationed on a high chair behind the counter dealing with customers, solicitors, wait staff, wholesalers, and whoever else enters. Fatima usually sits on a low chair just behind him tending to their children, preparing samosas, pastries, or cakes, most of the time shouting directions in a mix of Chichewa and English at the unseen kitchen staff behind the sooty wall that separates the front and the back of the house. You know the wait staff by name, but you have never been introduced to the kitchen staff.

Slim brawny figures only seen in (this) public when they shuffle through the restaurant carrying a heavy tub of cooking oil or some enormous bag of rice or Irish potatoes from a chugging, overloaded vehicle out front.

Tasty Bites is just one of Max and Fatima' businesses. It doesn't make a huge profit, but they like the sense of place, sociality, and routine it provides. They also own a small fleet of minibuses that Max inherited from his father, but they are trying to sell it. The petrol crisis, the state of the roads, normal graft, tedious oversight, and the ubiquity of police roadblocks are all jeopardizing profit margins. Managing the fleet has become more of a headache than anything else. Their new plan is to erect a mini-mall in Matawale, a booming town across the Zomba city line where middle-class civil servants who have invested wisely over the years are settling into reasonably sized homes built on square and rectangular plots cordoned off by tall gates and high walls.

They should do well—more or less urban with less crime than the congested townships near the Boma, Matawale has better infrastructure, good bike taxi service and great minibus access to town, not to mention clean water draining down from the plateau's southeastern face. And with proximity being

what it is (relative to time, amongst other things) the site is sure to become even closer to Zomba in the next few years.

Max is tapping into his kinship networks abroad to help finance the deal: extended family in Leicester, where he spent a chunk of his youth, if you remember correctly. The only issue is a small woodland gravesite that presently occupied a prominent place on the proposed site. Blueprints replete with footbridges extending over the sacred ground has been devised to convince the planning commission to OK the deal. You suspect they are just going through the motions, however, and that something resembling a wad of banknotes in some unmarked envelopes secured in brown paper bags submitted along with the proper documentation will be the real paperwork that secures approval. (This is mere speculation, of course—fantasy even. Another image you will not have the time or inclination to interrogate.)

Max and Fatima don't pay or treat their workers very well (at least by your standards), but it could be worse, far worse: Raiply, Illovo, Kaylekera (naturally)—and those just abject examples … Once you fold in the debilitating struggles associated with the everyday practice of "making it to month end" part and parcel to most jobs here, you come to realize that there are very good reasons why every civil servant and NGO worker in Malawi seems to have a side gig, why so many Malawians watch 24/7 Nigerian televangelists praying for big miracles, why witchcraft and sorcery are on the rise, why gaming is a growth industry, why nostalgia for Kamuzu is real and potent and powerful … Forget about flooding and famine and AIDS and albino hunting for a moment (and bracket Madonna's most recent adoption saga), and consider the unstable kwacha, the arable land beyond capacity, the unpredictable rains, the depleted nitrogen, the genetically modified maize, the plummeting tobacco prices, the rampant graft, the unflagging hemorrhage of brain drain, the deadly roads, the underfunded schools, the resilience of child marriage, the persistence of alcoholism, the rigged national exams, the overburdened hospitals and clinics, the overstocked prisons, the overloaded grid … Real life and death problems in a land of eight-letter-acronyms devised by development technocrats never unsurprised when human beings turn out to be multiple… (Is that too cynical? Too dire?)

You forgive James Ferguson for the cruel optimism on display in his non-negative ending to *Expectations for Modernity*—

> Prolonged economic decline, I have suggested, concentrates the critical mind; it makes visible, and forces into crisis, key elements of

> the modernist myths by which life in the "developing world" is normally understood. Decline, though often hellish to live through, is "good to think"—at least for those who would critically interrogate the certainties of modernist metanarratives. At the end of 1998, with much of the world already in recession or depression (and the rest possibly to follow), there would appear to be plenty of decline ahead of us—and with it, the morbid consolation of a challenging environment for thinking new thoughts about history, modernity, and global inequality. [Ferguson 1999: 257]

—because the preceding 256 pages, not to mention the near entirety of *The Anti-Politics Machine* (1994), is such a testament to the shared experience of being "burdened for nothing," as one mine-worker wrote in a desperate letter to the anthropologist featured as "ethnographic evidence" in a fascinating, yet little read appendix to the classic volume (Ferguson 1999: 267).

Which forces the question: Is highlighting the conditions under which a mine-worker chooses to close a letter written under the auspices of a research program with the valediction, "In sobs I pen off" (1999: 267)—as you have here in your tangential rendering of Max and Fatima's everyday ethics within the context off a broader history of violence, inequality, and dispossession—to risk failing to navigate the unspoken balancing act between hope and despair, structure and agency so central to contemporary Africanist scholarship since the late twentieth century (contemporary context of an emergent counter critique of the "Africa Rising'" mantra notwithstanding)?

You hope not—in part because the goal here is different: you're not trying to make a specific intervention in a discrete conversation at the axis of a set of carefully selected disciplinary sub-fields (at least not at this point); you're only trying to testify that you ended up learning to be selective about when and where to deploy your moral outrage. (A disposition you fear, now, was probably *not*, as you believed *then*, some affective vestige of deep solidarity that warranted your presence *there* in the first place; but instead—a symptom of the kind of naïve appropriation concomitant with the soft imperialism of certain state apparatuses perhaps best understood as what Teju Cole (2012) has dubbed, "the white-savior industrial complex").

And this is crucial: For how would you have ever justified such an endeavor if the motive was not, in some regard, indignation (of the sort Laura Nader (1969) advocated for in her classic essay)?

Maybe you would have said “adventure”—that search for a space outside of everyday life where substance is realized through resolution of experiential tensions (Simmel 1959, Sheridan & Price 2006: 193).

Maybe you would have said “love”—that expression of care and concern that arcs toward union between self and other in the production of an equitable “we” (Nozick 1989) in the name of a common “humanity” (Dubal 2018).

Counterintuitively, if not entirely reasonably, it would become the *critical management* of indignation as motive, the *denial* of the grand promise of adventure, and the *rejection* of love as union that emerged as the essential operations necessary for the kind of work you ultimately aspired to do.

Namely, the transformation of traces and recollections into a discrete stream of somewhat legible representations composed in the spirit of beauty, justice, and perhaps even truth, regardless (and in light of) its inherent impossibility (e.g. Mead 1928, Bateson 1936, Evans-Pritchard 1947, Leach 1954, Lévi-Strauss 1966, Geertz 1977, Crapanzano 1985, Stewart 1996, Tsing 2004, Garcia 2010).

Call it a lesson of method born of the field: lightness and indifference are techniques of the body (which can and should be learned); reciprocity, influence, access, positioning, networks—all crucial; you pick and choose your battles (often unaware, and sometimes even by default).

This is why it was important that Max and Fatima’s relatively minor exploitations didn’t bother you all that much at the time. You had acquired an “ordinary ethic” (Lambek 2010) derived from the “ethical life” (Keane 2017) of a particularly situated “moral anthropology” (Fassin, ed. 2015), one where your “initial indignation” (Nader 1974: 285) simply could no longer afford to remain at the tip of your tongue.

In so doing, despite losing access to those precious “energizing effects” (1974: 286) associated with research agendas that operate from heartbreak and outrage, a tradition that can be traced back to Morgan and up through the militant urgency of Scheper-Hughes (1995), what you ended up gaining was the prospect of mutual recognition in a zone of compromise and uncertainty—what some might call *everyday life*). And in *this shared space*—so difficult to inhabit, particularly after crossing lines of social and historical difference—the possibility that someone might truly look out for you, and that you might truly look out for them … for a moment, at least (e.g. Eaton 2000).

Interpellation is not the same as exchange (e.g., Mauss 1925, Munn 1986) let alone care (e.g. Taylor 2008, Stevenson 2014) after all.

And closure, whether it be in the form of principled refusal or unconditional embrace (two sides to the same coin), is far too often, to paraphrase Povinelli (2016), a one-way ticket to Nonlife on the wary continuum of "geontopower."

There is absolutely nothing new in this realization, of course.

Folktales, riddles, proverbs, or the figure of the chameleon (to offer a more local and specific example (Englund, ed. 2002)), are all resources that carry the capacity to generate the phlegm and determination necessary to carryon.

Each a genre of poetics that opens the possibilities for *retrieving* indignation, *reviving* adventure, and *recovering* love.

Not in ways that purport to put the world to rights, but that offer, often on the sly, subtle tactics to enact intimate efficacies on human scales.

It was Max, for example, who went out of his way, one day, some years back (at Tasty Bites)—to introduce you to Yunus Mussa:

"Hey, do you know that man over there?"

"No, but he looks familiar…"

"That's Yunus Mussa, our MP..."

"I recognize him from the newspapers…"

"Yes. And *that's* his car. Are you still trying to get to Blantyre today? Do you want me to talk to him?"

"No, I can handle it… Thanks Max."

Before long you found yourself buzzing through police checks, whooshing past roadside markets, weaving around impediments like pot-holes, bicycles and children. Overpopulation and urbanization feel like abstractions from the air-conditioned passenger's seat of the Honorable MP's state-sponsored Mercedes-Benz. You munch on tomato crisps, sip orange Fanta, listen to the radio. You talk politics and history, the state of the road, the weather and fertilizer subsidies. He tells you of his frustrations and ambitions. You agree that life is difficult, but worth living. Somewhere between the macadamia estate and the Buddhist temple near the big poultry farm not long after the Magomero turnoff, he asks you about your work. You mention the 24-hour video installation you are preparing to make, meant to capture the vicissitudes of everyday life so often occluded from most popular, widely circulated media representations of Malawi. "A true day in the life," you tell him. "24 full hours!" He says that that is really great, and that he hopes to see it someday. You mention that you are looking to team with a local producer. He says he knows of just the right person – a friend of his named Villant, a producer at Television Malawi, who has, in fact, just finished a documentary about Mulanje Mountain. Narrated by an anonymous, yet

authoritative, European explorer, the film features real-life dwarves recruited from local markets who depict magical Congolese pygmies rumored to inhabit the mountain's woody slopes. Dressed in banana leaves and speaking in primordial dialect, they dance around fires and rifle through dense bush searching for wayward foragers and unsuspecting travelers, sticks and machetes firmly in hand. It's going to be great, Yunus says. You pass through Kachere slum settlement at the cusp of dusk, cross into Blantyre-Limbe proper and get caught in the evening rush as the blood orange sun tucks in behind what you think is Michiru Mountain. Some street lights flicker on and off. Squadrons of mini-buses rumble through construction zones kicking up particulates into the amber evening air. Conductors shout names of townships and areas. Storefront speakers blast. Cripples beg for money. People carry things. Yunus locates some space to accelerate along Chimpembere Highway and guns it. You zip past Independence Arch, swing through Chichiri roundabout, and cut into the ShopRite parking lot inside the new mega-mall across the street from what is now (again) Kamuzu Stadium (for now). You've arrived. You exchange phone numbers (his two for your one), and you thank him. He says not to worry, that he loves helping people: "Life is all about making connections, after all," he says, as he slides back into his vehicle before vanishing into the iridescent mass of sundowner traffic. From then on, "YUNUS MUSSA, MP" occupies a conspicuous entry in your mobile phone's contact list. You will never call him, but the site of the entry makes you feel important, somehow.

How long ago was that? (Four years ago? Ten years ago?)
It depends.

The video is done. You worked on it for years. Sometimes you get stuck on something longer than you had hoped or anticipated. You believed in that project—the attempt to render everyday life in Malawi in a 24-hour video. The ultimate long take, you called it. A certain kind of anthropology about it. (Duration was the key, you realized later).

There is Edith for 24 hours moving through her day in Ngwale Village: sleeping, waking, fetching water, doing the dishes, preparing for school, making tea, taking tea, escorting her sisters along the narrow earthen path beside the creek up the steep hill toward Domasi Mission past rows of maize and beans and pumpkins and banana trees, meeting friends here and there along the way, gossiping before the morning bell in tightknit circles behind the red brick school

blocks, singing the national anthem, enduring hours of class, buying *mandazi* at recess from the line of vendors squatting with their plastic bins beneath the bell tower, crossing paths with her estranged father on her way back to class, struggling to keep awake during a maths lesson, playing netball with grit and vigor, washing her feet, tracing her steps back home, fetching more water, doing more dishes, playing a round of games with other children nearby, snacking on a stick of sugarcane, fetching more water, having *nsima* with *ndiwo* before doing more dishes and doing more homework, only this time under the flickering glow of a small, oily paraffin lamp with her sister, Memory, and their mother, Cecilia, by her side, reading as long as they can before falling asleep, the rustle of bodies turning on a slim mattress set on a reed mat and the terrible buzz of a mosquito the only sounds captured by the shotgun mic mounted firmly to the camera stationed on a tripod set just outside the door of the room where they sleep.

What to make of this footage? What can you see? What can't you see? What did the frame and time produce in collaboration with routine and variation that day? How can conferring close attention upon it reorient us in worthwhile ways? (Can it even?) Is this data or art? Exploitation or negotiation? How can a life feel so familiar and yet so strange *simultaneously*? How is intimacy achieved in the absence of knowing? What happens when we capture someone's likeness? (Reproduce it? Circulate it? Endow it with knowledge? Subject it to query, doubt, concepts, theories, angles, agendas?) What can those kinds of operations offer? (And for whom?) Do these kinds of questions have ramifications? There is always that sense that, even if they do, it may not be enough.

The bottom line was that you loved the footage, absent it was of any fixed narrative or agenda. 24 hours unedited. Sometimes tedious, sometimes transcendent. Shaky and still, formal and informal. Open-ended, not yet foreclosed (that was the real key, the gift).

The biggest problem was technical: How to transcribe, translate, and subtitle the full day's speech? This was a stipulation of the broader project of which it was part. Whatever speech that was captured during the 24 hours was supposed to be subtitled in its original language(s) before being translated into English. This would all be done on an online platform (still in beta) called DotSub (like YouTube, but devoted to subtitling and translation).

You imagined it would be straightforward, had made arrangements with the University of Malawi to work with a professor and a team of students to complete the task. You were told it would probably take "a month or two," but the internet wasn't strong enough, and attempts to load the footage from within

Malawi were futile. It just kept freezing. “I’m sorry, this is the problem with Malawi,” wrote your contact.

“The problem” here being the almost inevitable obstacles that spring up as one attempts to move forward with novel endeavors across so many Malawian contexts. Problems that are by no means *naturally* or *essentially* Malawian (or Zambian or Tanzanian…), but that should be appreciated as the very real traces of a legacy of British Imperialism (with all the horror, malfunction, frustration, absurdity that entails), problems that are made especially difficult when it is nearly impossible to assess their full extent or determination. (In this case, however, you would learn later from a Scottish IT volunteer who had been brought in to address the cripplingly slow speed of internet service at the university that much of the server space in the network was occupied (to the great surprise of some but not so much to others) by massive amounts of downloaded internet pornography. Amusing and thought provoking as this revelation may have been, it is important to remember that, at the time, you were still left with that gaping feeling of wondering how to proceed with your project, or if to proceed at all.)

You did consider doing the full transcription and translation yourself, but your Chichewa wasn’t very good at the time (nor would it ever be, you are ashamed to admit). Besides, the day’s speech turned out to be a palimpsest. Constant code-shifting between deep Chichewa, colloquial Chiyao, and rudimentary English proved a real challenge for even the finest Bantu specialists with whom you consulted. In addition, because the subjects in the video were mostly youth, the transcript was full of short-lived slang and inside jokes, none of which your subjects would be able to recall the meaning of (even a few months later). How then to proceed?

“The Global Lives Project” (a name that always troubled you) was initially composed of 10 shoots completed around the world: Brazil, Malawi, Lebanon, Japan, India, Serbia, China, Kazahstan, Indonesia, and the United States. Each of these 24-hour videos were supposed to be transcribed in their original language(s) and translated into English on Dotsub, where it would be possible to translate them into an infinite number of languages beyond. But this never really happened. A few producers did successfully subtitle their footage, but most did bits and pieces before conceding. The task was just too enormous. And there was no real budget or staff to speak of. People needed to move on.

Why didn’t you?

Completing the subtitling would require assembling a team of native Chichewa and Chiyao speakers with access to strong internet connections who would be willing to devote a significant amount of time and energy on behalf of an obscure video installation/digital archive of human life experience that might never gain a wide audience or enjoy any significant usage. Someone suggested Facebook as a way forward. You didn't have an account, so you opened one and formed a group called "Global Lives Project—Malawi." You invited Malawians you knew to join, then you invited their friends, and then their friends (and so on). You enjoyed the process and the group grew quickly. You began to contact people individually to explain the project and invite them to participate: "Have a look at Clip 11D," you would write, "can you manage to transcribe the first two minutes by Wednesday? Here are some simple instructions..."

The footage was divided into 96 consecutive 15 minute clips arranged sequentially on Dotsub (roughly 9 hours of sleep meant about 60 clips to subtitle). You reckoned that each clip would take about 25 hours to transcribe, translate, and subtitle with some degree of fidelity. 1500 hours of work altogether. You monitored the progress on google spreadsheets. People would try and fail or make promises and fail. The group grew to over 1,000 members: 250 initially agreed to help, but in the end, only about 25 contributed anything of note; and ultimately it was only a few who really enabled you to see the project through. You called them *super translators*—a small cohort of cosmopolitan expatriate elites scattered throughout the world (England, Norway, Qatar, Canada, Germany, Australia, the United States) working in a variety of fields (e.g. academia, governance, diplomacy, finance, even resource extraction) who ended up devoting hundreds and hundreds of hours to the project. Their generosity was a lifeline. In the absence of any clear function or purpose, and with no promise of remuneration or capitalization, to painstakingly code line-after-line of everyday speech uttered by a group of random children on some arbitrary day in some run-of-the-mill Malawian village for someone you have never met but only communicated with online was … well … what? You still cannot quite say exactly. There is something appealing (and perhaps even fundamental) about shared pursuits with no clear end or product (especially in climates of market force). Endeavor as end in and of itself is a key strand of friendship, you figure.

One year to transcribe, another to translate. In the end, more than 45,000 subtitles—a full transcript featuring Chichewa, Chiyao, and English, a full translation in English. Each subtitle proofread, copyedited, and synced.

An online archive of human life experience. The video eventually installed as part of a show in a space called, “The Room for Big Ideas,” at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, the San Francisco video art museum where Steve Jobs used to introduce the newest Apple products.

You insisted on writing the artist’s statement (it was important for you to attempt to distance the work from “social anesthetics” (MacDougall 2005: 58) like National Geographic or Disney’s Magic Kingdom, whose crisp trademarked reductive, essentializing othering you hoped was the obverse of Global Lives, which you had wished would be received as legitimate work of video art):

> *Framed by the arc of the day and conveyed through the intimacy of video, we have slowly and faithfully captured 24 continuous hours in the lives of 10 people from around the world. They are screened here in their own right, but also in relation to one another.*
>
> *There is no narrative other than that which is found in the composition of everyday life, no overt interpretations other than that which you may bring to it.*
>
> *By extending the long take to a certain extreme and infusing it with the spirit of cinema verité, we invite audiences to confer close attention onto other worlds, and simultaneously reflect upon their own. The force and depth of human difference and similarity are revealed in this process. Gaps which mark cultural divides feel, at once, both wider and narrower. This sense – that we, as humans, are both knowable and unknowable, fundamentally different as well as the same – opens a space for dialogue.*

Wilfred Bion, the British psychoanalyst, had a concept called O, the absolute ineffability and unknowability of a thing—that sense of a thing that is absent yet present, radiant and resounding, should you open yourself up to it. Your great hope for the footage was that someone would attend to its O, that a viewer might stand in relation to the footage, and, for a time, be silent.

“This is a process that favors experience over explanation, and which proceeds more by implication than demonstration” (1998: 11), Lucien Taylor wrote regarding the films of David MacDougall.

If they spoke about the footage, you hoped it would be to share little things seen or heard—like the organization of a math lesson or the cadence of some birdsong. Or to offer up specific questions—such as about the nature and course

of a particular stream, or the history and rules of netball. Or maybe to relate a personal memory that the footage managed to conjure—like doing homework with a parent, or playing childhood games in a field.

Whatever they did, you just did not want people trying to figure the damn thing out, or—worse still—to use it as a platform for saying what they already knew or professed.

More questions less answers. More problems less solutions.

Time. Space. Patience. Expanse. Relations. Structure. History. Politics. Identity. Experience.

What is the opposite of a foreclosure?

"I prefer the films that put their audience to sleep in the theater. Some films have made me doze off in the theater, but the same films have made me stay up at night, wake up thinking about them in the morning, and keep on thinking about them for weeks," said Iranian filmmaker, Abbas Kiarostami in a 1997 interview with Jamsheed Akrami.

"'Possibility' is thereby rendered in its emergent phase, as a presentist, lateral conception that conveys variety and interchange rather than having a pregnant forward thrust into the time to come," explained Scottish anthropologist, Jane Guyer (2009: 360), regarding the work of ethnography.

For you, it was about difference, humility, and the impossibility of knowing. This may be why the closer you felt to the footage the further away it felt from you. That was the magic and the promise of the whole thing. A specific kind of intimacy, both reciprocal *and* elliptical. A peculiar tick. A failed joke. A broom leaning against a tree in a dark corner. A sly side-glance at the camera operator from a student in the back row. The colorful gesture of one of those fierce women selling *mandazi* outside the mission school. There was always something new. The nature of *encounter*. Always already much more to see, hear, feel, account for. It is more than excess that slips outside our intricate frameworks and careful constructions. A promising reality when it is not so deeply debilitating. Interminability is not necessarily a bad thing.

It *is* a small world, after all.

Meantime, you had found your way back into academic anthropology. Way leads onto way, they say, and after three more years of graduate training and one successful grant application, you were boarding the second of three flights bound for a place sometimes referred to as "fieldwork."

You've got a hardcover copy of *Tristes Tropiques* in your carry-on that you bought at some used bookstore a few years back, the *11*— price point inscribed in pencil on the front page. You intend to finally read it from cover-to-cover on the long flight over (SFO to LLW via JFK and JNB); but, again, you barely make it past the first chapter.

Like Lévi-Strauss, you hate traveling and explorers; likewise, you wonder if a detailed account of trivial circumstances and insignificant happenings will effectively yield any insights worth communicating.

So much effort and expenditure has been wasted already, you think, before falling into a deep dramamine sleep.

Up in first class, Yunus Mussa sits comfortably, fresh off a diplomatic mission to the United States on behalf of His Excellency, Dr. Bingu wa Mutharika, President of the Republic of Malawi.

When you boarded the flight, you noticed him standing in the middle of the aisle in a mute mustard suit. You shouted out to him, but he clearly didn't recognize you; so you moved toward him, extending your hand, and said: "Tasty Bites!" Which was strange.

"Umm…" you added, "I think you gave me a lift to Blantyre a few years ago. I was making a film at the time. You put me in touch with Villant Ndasowa. Do you remember?"

"Ah yes! So good to see you again, Mr. …" he says, reaching his hand out.

"Price," you say, embracing his gentle shake.

"What were you doing in New York?" you ask.

"Oh, you know, we had to clarify some... issues, some… misunderstandings at the U.N."

It is at this moment that you notice a small cohort of Malawian elites stationed throughout first class looking at you with a mix of guarded suspicion and derision. The men in slightly-too-large suits. The women in extravagant, traditionally-patterned suits with matching hats. They look at you from across the aisle. You are not well dressed—the first sin of fieldwork (according to Dumas, as registered by Lévi-Strauss, as you are about to read, with a degree of shame).

"Oh, wow, excellent..." you say, feeling awkward. "Well, I hope the trip went well!"

"I think it did! We were also in Washington DC for some meetings. It was very nice. I think everything will work out."

“Great. Are you still representing—what was it?—Zomba North?”

“I'm actually a cabinet minister now, Minister of Labor to be precise.”

“Oh wow. I'm so sorry. I didn't realize...”

And you truly are—you truly are sorry.

How could you not have known this? Why have you stopped reading the *Nyasa Times* and *The Nation* online?

You are embarrassed. You are as woefully unprepared for this trip, just as you feared you were. What on earth are you doing?

“And what it is that you are doing, Mr. Price? Still making movies?”

“No, yes, I mean, hopefully both. I'm actually trying to finish my doctorate. I've gone back to school. I'll be conducting research at Zomba Mental Hospital, actually.”

“That's beautiful! You know, I was Deputy Minister for Social Development and Persons with Disabilities previously. This is an important subject. We need more research at places like Zomba Mental. Those people are truly suffering. Truly.”

“Yes they are sir,” you say gravely.

“What kind of research will you be doing exactly?”

“Ethnographic research, sir,” you say, feeling the press of bodies behind you lining up to take their seats.

“Epidemiology?” he says?

“No, sir, ethnography—social anthropology.”

“Oh, that's important too… That's beautiful, really. I'll tell you what, let me give you my number,” he passes you his card. “If I can be of any assistance, do not hesitate to call.”

You pass him your boarding pass and find your pen. He writes his mobile number on the back: *YUNUS MUSSA phone 0999972555.*

You thank him again, but he says not to worry – that he loves helping people and making connections.

You make your way to the back of the plane, hoist your carry-on into the overhead compartment, shuffle over to your window seat, sit down, buckle your seatbelt, reach into your personal item, remove your moleskin notebook and your hardcover copy of *Tristes,* and slip them into the pocket behind the back of the seat in front of you.

You take a deep breath, look out the window at the ground crew, turn back, reach forward, lift the moleskin notebook out of the seat back pocket,

unwrap the strap from the front cover, open it, and write, faintly, in the upper right corner of the first page:

*Not as I pictured it to be. Gap between real and ideal.*
*No romance in this, only reaction and pragmatism in the face of error and a field of constraint.*
*We piece it all together in retrospect.*
*Stick together the floating pieces and scraps.*

This was a long time coming—your first day of genuine official fieldwork.

It began in college. One day you had lunch with a friend who raved about a lecturer in sociology. You took the course the following term. One by one, you fell in love with Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and Freud. Social thought felt more vital and prescient than religion, your major at the time.

The conversion had as much to do with form as it did with content. The assistant professor of sociology arrives in the lecture hall, a mass of papers and books tucked under his arm. Mid-to-late 30s, but seemingly older. Shirt tucked and untucked. Baggy olive trousers tucked into green-yellow goulashes. Tenure-track, wife and kid, another on the way. Clean-shaven and stubbly. Balding, with a penchant for scratching, messing, and pulling out what little hair remained on the side of his head (particularly when referencing his brother, the corporate capitalist). Money as symbolic token, the iron cage of bureaucracy, surplus and exchange values, civilization and its discontent, anomie and suicide—all delivered to *you* by a man who you found uncommonly alive. You wrote down everything he said and more. You still have those notebooks, in fact.

What were the conditions under which this man spoke to you? The yearly tuition was $25,000 a year, but you didn't pay that. In the years before you applied to college, your father, overcome by an undiagnosed case of clinical depression, lost a job, through no fault of his own, and never really recovered. Paralysis slowly set in, his motivation quickly faded. He began to sleep through most of the day, you would learn later, after dropping you and your sister off at school. It affected your mother. They worked hard to hide it from the children. Quickly and quietly, your family sunk into a well of debt—so much so that when it came time to apply for college you ended up being so poor on paper as to qualify you for need blind admission, making extravagant New England liberal arts colleges you would not have been able to afford otherwise a real option.

Ironies and unintended consequences abound.

You had not known real wealth before arriving at Middlebury College. Teenagers with brand new Saabs. Prep-school lineages, insider knowledge, and recognizable names. Long green lawns stretching over the hills where poor white farmers could never be seen (apart from their children who served you in the dining halls). Quadrangles dotted with historically preserved granite buildings, their likeness embossed on brass paraphernalia for sale in the campus bookstore. A "snow bowl" somewhere else, near a "mountain campus" dedicated to creative writing. Whiteness. Privilege. Identity formation. Social reproduction.

Your father, the son of an activist and an engineer, had been a criminal defense attorney before shifting to personal injury—*the man* always the enemy. Your mother, the daughter of homemaker and a cop, an English teacher before moving into special education—*the man* always the father. He an episcopal agnostic with deep nostalgia for the radicalism and experimentation of the 1960s. She a lapsed Catholic with respect for law and order and a penchant for penning protest notes to politicians. Educated, but by no means elites. (New York City only a few miles away, though it might as well have been thousands.) Firmly middle-class (though liberal and progressive when compared to your neighbors, who were mostly working-class Reagan republicans). One of the only non-Italian-Americans in town (it often felt). An American, middle-class nuclear family with East coast inflections. Your mother's favorite book was *The Great Gatsby*, your father's was *The Bonfire of the Vanities*—so you could have been seduced by the story the college was telling itself, but instead it repulsed you, made you feel poor, inadequate, defensive. By the time of your second year, you were primed and in need of sublimation. The young sociologist that walked into your lecture hall that semester conducted research on the micropolitics at work behind the mass incarceration of African-American youth in America, perhaps the greatest social injustice of your time. Pacing back and forth, gesticulating wildly, calibrating the volume and tone of his speech to the urgency of his claims, craning his neck around the lecture hall to make as much eye contact as possible with as many of us as possible, almost in an attempt to bring us all together, united against the hidden evils of society, the young sociologist revealed to us all the truth of the world. It was as if some mist-laden veil had begun to recede.

Sociology shared a department with anthropology, but you preferred the former. Though drawn to the idea of ethnography, anthropology struck you as indecisive, unassertive, and unnecessarily vague. Moreover, the anthropology professors, though clearly intelligent and worldly in unique ways, appeared to be less forceful or certain in their claims and approaches. Their muddled wishy-

washiness struck you, at the time, as simply unjustifiable. “Why privilege ambivalence and embrace ambiguity in a world rife with problems?” You concluded. “Understanding should be prolegomenon for action.”

And act you did—you went to the Black South to build houses for the poor during spring break of your first year, latched onto a service learning trip in Guatemala for a month during your sophomore year, interned with a rural social worker in Scotland before volunteering at a hospice in England while you studied abroad during your junior year, and taught poor high school kids science in Harlem during your senior year. In short, you did whatever you could to put some space between you and campus. Even when you were there you would devote your weekends to working with “troubled youth” through a mentoring program you coordinated. It was an oppositional identity—it made you feel good.

When it came time to graduate there seemed to be no other choice but to join the Peace Corps. Blissfully unaware of any “dot-com boom,” deeply resentful of your peers who were going off to work for various Boston and New York consulting companies, completely unconcerned with the degree of debt you had just saddled yourself with, and totally ignorant of your parents’ financial turmoil and the impending foreclosure of your childhood home, you asked your recruiter to send you to the poorest country possible.

A few months later, you set off for Malawi.

The first thing to catch your eye was a jacaranda tree in full bloom which you immediately assumed to be native. After losing a coin-toss with another volunteer for an attractive field site in the resplendent Thyolo tea plantations of the south, you were posted north to Chikangawa Community Day Secondary School (CDSS) in Mzimba, the place no one else wanted to go. We had all come to “Africa,” after all. There were certain expectations (conscious or not) of what that should look like: flat-top savannah trees dotting a long, infinite horizons with the great yellow suns setting in a distance which traced the same time-worn path since the dawn of humanity, indigenous peoples enacting rituals whilst playing drums and dancing near grass-thatched mud huts, maybe a rain forest with some monkeys overhead or a tropical beach where barefoot children with everlasting smiles greeted angular fisherman in dugout canoes returned to shore with a fresh catch. And if none of those were available, then at least a splendid view of the rolling green hills of a colonial tea plantation.

None of these were Chikangawa.

Known for its incessant rain and interminable fog, Chikangawa was a colonial invention. A handful of decades before your arrival, the British had displaced a few thousand villagers on the Viphya Plateau to construct one of the largest pine plantations on the continent. The idea was to build a giant pulp mill 30 km to the east, on the shores of Lake Malawi (then Nyasa); but the project was abandoned after independence. What remained was a resource absent of any really functional infrastructure. Hundreds of people still technically worked in the plantation, but mostly in name only. Most of the staff spent much of their time farming on rented plots in villages beyond the escarpment to ensure their families would have enough food to make it through hunger season. They also engaged in small businesses, of which there were many. If you had the capital, you could buy non- or semi-perishable goods from regional markets in Mzimba, Mzuzu or even Lilongwe. Alternatively, you could make the 150km roundtrip to Nkhata Bay for fresh fish. You would then resell at a stall in the main market outside the plantation headquarters, directly out of your home via word of mouth, or simply by strolling through residential areas and villages and calling out the names of your goods.

*Chhhhhhhambo, chambo, chambochambochambochambochambo*
*Chambo. Chambochambo, chamboooooooooo…*

The degree of discipline, hard work, and economic sophistication necessary to achieve a state of security and well-being astonished you; and even then, there was never any guarantee for success. You think of Jon Jere, for instance.

Jon Jere was the innkeeper for *Kasito Resthouse II*, the beautifully crafted government lodge set in the woods on the outskirts of Chikangawa. Originally designed to cater to colonial emissaries, elites, missionaries and travelers, at the turn of the 21st century, *Kasito II* was more an artifact than a destination.

Most passersby simply passed it by. Should anyone want or need to stay the night along this slim, windy stretch of tarmac some 30km south of Mzuzu, there was a newer, more modern lodge that was a bit closer to the main road down at Raiply—the big, modern, private, Indian-owned lumber company which began its management of a hearty concession of the forest on a reported hundred-year lease shortly before your arrival in 1999, a company which slowly but steadily syphoned human labor and resources from the Ministry of Forestry's Viphya Plantations Division over the course of the next few decades with the

promise of (slightly) higher wages at the cost of a modicum of security and meagre entitlements (surprise, surprise).

Similar to the plantation itself, *Kasito II* felt nearly obsolete. And Jon Jere, like many government workers, felt severely underutilized. A difficult situation—crippling to some, in fact.

(This is something you probably couldn't truly appreciate at the time because you were simply too young, too naïve, and too inexperienced to register; but which, now, in the process of writing/remembering, you can and do, however impossible it may be to respect or transmit.)

People drank (men mostly), and their families suffered the consequences (which were manifest, and probably ever manifesting).

As far as you knew, Jon Jere didn't drink—No—Jon Jere worked hard, remained positive, and was almost positively, pathologically upbeat.

The tourist motto for Malawi (it's brand, for all intents and purposes) has long been, "Malawi: The Warm Heart of Africa." Coined by an expat Briton some years back, the phrase attempts to transmit a widely distributed belief in an almost preternatural quality attributed to Malawians—regardless of class, race, age, gender, sexuality, religion, or ethnic identity (or any other conceivable marker of difference or individuation for that matter)—namely: a consistent and unflappable affability, uniquely gentle and sweet.

The figure of Jon Jere embodied this fantasy: a sweet, kind, dear, and gentle man; a man indelibly warm and almost inexplicably happy; a man who would smile until it appeared as if he could physically smile no longer; a man who was constantly in motion—active and engaged despite (or perhaps *in spite* of) a lack of engagement and opportunity offered by the world. In short, the kind of man who should inherit the Earth.

You met him one day at the market in Chikangawa. He invited you to the lodge. You took him up on the offer. It was quiet and pastoral, an escape from the challenges of small-scale society living as an out-of-place Peace Corps Volunteer.

It was also elegant. Unlike so many other decaying colonial structures throughout the nation, *Kasito II* was, under Jon Jere's care, as clean, functional and inviting as it possibly could have been. There was a fireplace and couches and a concrete patio with a view east beyond the escarpment to the villages along the horizon stretching off toward the Zambian border. The dishes were still and clean, there was no dust or drips. The light moved slowly through the interior. The place felt like a photograph.

An extraordinary innkeeper with an expressed love for cooking and baking, Jon appeared to be genuinely happy to receive you. He encouraged you to return anytime. You were happy to take him up on this offer. You would try to bring groceries from town when you visited. It was nice. He would make you tea and bake bread, give you space to read or catch up on marking or write letters. And then you would talk about life in town, in America, and elsewhere. You survived Y2K. George W. Bush was elected President. The kwacha was losing its value. The twin towers were yet to fall. You had never baked bread before Jon taught you. It was a miracle.

Jon lived with his wife, Mary, in a small servant's house, in the thick of the woods, just out of earshot from the lodge, a stone's throw from the final bend in the dirt road which connected *Kasito II* to the main tarmac, about a half kilometer away. Mary was younger than Jon. She probably left primary school to marry him. She was from a nearby village. Her English was poor, so you would speak with her in Chitumbuka. It was good practice for you. Most people in Chikangawa were lifelong civil servants. Products of the Kamuzu era, they spoke English well and were always keen to share it with you.

Jon and Mary had a baby on the way. This magnified his feeling that his salary from the plantation was unsustainable. He would need another income stream if he was going to be able to offer his child the kind of possibilities in life which he and Mary had not been afforded. (One of the great ironies of the free primary school education initiative for all that had come on the backs of multi-party democracy was that it, almost overnight, had crippled the nation's public education system, leaving only the wealthy or connected with easy access to quality education in an increasingly privatized industry.)

Jon had been saving up for a long while to buy a mass of broiler chicks from a wholesaler he knew in Mzimba who promised to offer him an excellent deal. If he could raise them successfully, he could use the profit from the eggs and meat as foundational capital for higher yielding businesses. Jon didn't think of himself as a businessman, but what choice did he have? He bought the chicks and housed them in a lovingly hand-crafted coop affixed to the side of his home. The coop had high walls made from pine offcuts from the plantation which he sunk deep into the earth. In between, and all around, he wove plenty of wire to keep the livestock safe from whatever predators remained in the forest (hyenas mostly). You visited him not long afterward and saw the chicks there—he was so proud. A week later, half were dead. A week after that, they were all gone. They had died, one at a time. It must have been terrible to watch, to experience. Not only for

Jon, but also for Mary of course. Some disease, some misfortune—something. There was not very much to say. Back to the drawing board, Jon said. But how? You wondered.

His daughter was born a few months later. He asked you to name her. You protested, but he insisted. You protested some more, but he just kept smiling at you. You laughed and conceded. You had never seen a newborn before. Jon laughed at this fact. Then Mary laughed at this fact. They asked you to hold her. Amazing little fingers alive and gripping one of yours.

You chose to name her Cathy, the name of your neighbor's eldest daughter, a top student with a real sensitivity for the world. You offered them as much money as you could at the time; and them some more when your service was complete. This was part of the plan, but it could have been more.

Cathy Jere is still out there. You received a Facebook friend request from Mary Jere years later. It was a few months after the accident, asking you for whatever help you could muster to ensure that Cathy might remain in school during a harrowing time. It was terrible, you sent what you could. You found out what happened in greater detail from others.

Years had passed for Jon and Mary but nothing was moving. Then, one day, a South African mushroom company arrived in Chikangawa interested in harvesting a certain kind of mushroom throughout the plantation for export. The investors had stayed at *Kasito II* during their initial visit and met Jon, whom, no doubt, made an extraordinary impression.

After they reached an agreement with the Ministry for concession rights, they set up shop and asked John to leave his post with the forestry department to serve as their operations manager. This may or may not have been a difficult decision. He would have to risk losing his housing, his meagre (yet regular) paycheck, as well as his pension for a real chance at economic mobility, one that might never come again.

He took that chance, submitted his letter of resignation, and started working for the South Africans. The first year was a great success. There was real hope and promise. It appeared to be Jon's breakthrough.

In the second year, however, the rains were not what they had always been and the mushroom crop was meagre. The South Africans, frustrated by the unexpected loss, were suddenly absent and out of reach, leaving Jon to explain to his staff why they were not being paid.

Enraged, and convinced that Jon was lying and actually diverting the funds into his own coffers, these men and women, who had also left *their* stable

positions with the ministry, began to press him. In response, Jon offered him the only thing he could: access to the company vehicle and its petrol.

It was a major risk, for if the South Africans had discovered he was allocating company resources elsewhere, he could have been fired. But it was the only thing he could do, and it paid off initially.

Jon starting shuttling any members of staff or the family members back and forth to Mzimba Boma where they could buy various goods at wholesale prices for resale in the plantation and the throughout the surrounding areas. It improved his relations with his staff and his neighbors, and put the rumors mostly to rest. People appreciated the risk.

But this is a famously treacherous road, winding in-and-out and up-and-down through the Viphya plateau, often through dense pockets of fog and rain. Malawi is also one of the most dangerous nations in the world in terms of driving accidents—narrow roads, riddled with potholes, drunk drivers, dodgy vehicles, reckless mini-bus drivers and sleep deprived long-haul trailers competing for space with pedestrians and livestock make entails every road journey with a certain degree of risk. So when you were told that Jon had lost his life along with 18 others when his vehicle was hit head-on by a runaway shipping container that was dislodged from a lorry on a steep curve somewhere near the M22 turnoff, you were shocked and devastated, but not surprised. Just before your arrived in 1999 half of the Chikangawa Community Day Secondary School football team had been involved in a similar crash and survived. Many of your students still had the scars. A year after you left, another crash—this time Mzimba Secondary School students en route back home. It was a national affair. The President visited.

Many said this would never happen before democracy. There was a real nostalgia for colonial and neo-colonial rule: for a time when no one went hungry, when the currency was stable, when there was no theft or crime, when the schools (however few) were strong, and no one had ever heard of AIDS.

“Things have changed,” was a common refrain.

“I can’t eat democracy,” was another.

The first months had been difficult. You were allotted an enormous, three-bedroom house in the relatively decadent “managers’ compound.” This, despite the fact that you were twenty-two with no real job experience.

It took you three months to secure a transfer to a one-bedroom living quarters in the high density “main compound” where most of your students and colleagues lived. “But you are a white man,” a senior colleague said, “you deserve to live in a *big* house,” she added, with an extraordinary wink of mockery.

When they found out you had been angling for the move, people wondered if you were writing a book. They said you would be attacked by dogs, targeted by thieves, perhaps even bewitched.

The head of the school committee, Mr. Simengwa—who would later become a friend, and who, many years later, like your father, would also suffer a stroke, but who, unlike your father, would not benefit from the same degree of medical attention or health care infrastructure necessary to make a serious recovery, and so, instead, would never again regain his speech or his ability to walk, and would remain homebound, in a small EH-6 model house at the cusp of the forest, in "damn compound", where, for years, he listened to the radio while Mrs. Simengwa carefully and lovingly and delicately cared for him, until his death in 2012, not long after your last visit, when you sat with him, beneath an old faded poster of Kamuzu, an cried a little together, unexpectedly—well, it was Mr. Simengwa who finally secured you that housing transfer.

Little acts of generosity—you were terribly grateful.

You hadn't come so far to be so far removed (though this is always a temptation and a possibility, as you discovered with *Kasito II*), and you settled in quiet nicely after that, meshing into the scene in so far as you could.

No verandah, really—only the narrow concrete drain the lined the ground outside your door that encompassed the perimeter of the four-room block you shared with the family next door.

Mr. and Mrs. in the bedroom with the newborn, the primary school girl and the twins in the living room, and the first born with his young wife and *their* newborn in the converted blackened concrete kitchen block out front.

You can't remember any of their names now, and you feel full of shame with regards to this fact.

You only recall the sound of Mr. working in his makeshift carpentry and joinery studio (a wooden structure constructed out of pine edge slabs and black plastic sheets and built at the end of the concrete kitchen/bathing house block), in the hours before dawn, each morning, more or less, without fail, for the two years you lived there: the chuck, chuck, chuck of the adze even before the cluck, cluck, cluck of the chickens, or the squak, squak, squak of the guinea fowl, or the waa, waa, waa of the baby and the cling, cling, clang of the morning dishes, beside the gush, gush, gush of the shared faucet stationed sideways in the clay earth center of the shared space between the "boys' quarters" where you all had lived. (And this, probably only because *As I Lay Dying* had had such a profound effect on you, a few years before.)

At the time, you figured he was the only person in Chikangawa up and working at that hour. But you would learn later on that your dear friend and colleague from the secondary school, the science teacher, Mrs. Botha, also regularly woke early, in those same dark, cold morning hours.

It had begun, she had told you, shortly after Mr. Botha had died. She couldn't sleep; so she would get up and work at her sewing machine for hours before getting Mable and Jero, up and out of the house for school.

You would often cross paths with her (literally) on the way to school. Small woman, big presence. Leopard skin patterned coat. Bright smile (more a gift than an indication, you think now). Stern and formidable, yet jovial and bright. A giggle that could be deployed in a variety of manner to devastating effect.

"Mr. Price: Are you ready for another. school. day?"

"Good morning Mrs. Botha."

All in all, you were a model volunteer: you taught your classes, managed the school's football team, distributed condoms at the local barbershop, secured some grants for some small projects, even farmed a little (though not well).

Of course, there was the issue of Mr. Ng'ombe, the Head Teacher from Karonga Teacher Training College who was dispatched to Chikangawa to replace your friend, Mrs. Kumwenda, who died suddenly in her sleep one night, most likely of aneurysm or a heart attack, with her developmentally disabled child by her side, whom she always slept with. (You were the one called to the house by her first born that morning. "Mr. Price, Mommy will not get up." You rushed to the house as if there was something you could do. Tried to administer CPR (even though you didn't know how), then ran for help and secured a lorry to carry her to Mzuzu Central hospital, where she would be pronounced dead on arrival. It was you and Mr. Jenda, another teacher, in the back of the lorry with the body. You probably realized she was dead a few minutes after taking off. It was a long, cold, silent drive. A few minibuses overtook you, heads bowing in condolence through the window as they passed. It was so cold. You held her hand the whole way, went on to start a scholarship fund in her name, raised a few thousand dollars, assisted a few dozen girls and women—a nice gesture, the kind of thing you don't do anymore.)

Ng'ombe's reputation preceded him in ways you could have not experienced before. Big aloof man, with a dreary stare that bespoke the potential for a sudden act of violence. It was said that he was a witch. People kept their distance, especially at first. He was clearly unhappy to have been posted to what

he considered to be a rural secondary school (despite the fact that it was along the main road). It took him some time to settle in. Some of the senior faculty proved adept at ingratiation. It was important for them to do so: the only chance of them being selected to represent the school at workshops and trainings, where profitable "allowances" and "per diems" were distributed for the trouble of being away from your "duty station," was to be in the good graces of the boss. You didn't blame them. But you didn't like Ng'ombe, and that was no secret (another privilege of yours). One day he asked you get a rubber stamp made for him that read, "HEAD MASTER, CHIKANGAWA COMMUNITY DAY SECONDARY SCHOOL, PO BOX 1, CHIKANGAWA, MZIMBA." You suggested he order one that read "HEAD TEACHER" instead, as it was gender neutral (and this was an emerging issue at the time, and you were there, as you understood it, as a beacon for progressive change). He told you, "No," that he wanted it to read "HEAD MASTER." You got it with "HEAD TEACHER" to spite him. It was all downhill from there.

Eventually, he tried to take away your Form 2 English class just before they took their important Junior Certificate Exams. This was your favorite class. You had worked with them closely for two years, and you had high hopes for them all. He knew this. You ended up yelling at one another in his office, nearly putting your fist through his desk before you stormed out. Everyone in the courtyard was listening. Mrs. Botha hustled up to you as you walked away and, walking-side-by-side, said, "Mr. Price… It appears as if you have been having a disagreement with our esteemed Head Master," and then giggled. It was a glorious, beautiful, sinister giggle, and it calmed you down.

Relationships proved more edifying than work.

Your closest friendship, maybe your only *true* friendship (although later you would question if *friendship* could ever be applied to persons so far removed from one another in terms of circumstance), was with a brilliant, but disaffected assistant forester called Chimomo.

The name suited him, the cadence of it. Three syllables, like a resolute knock on the door_Chi-mo-mo_unobtrusive, yet strong and direct, straight to the point—a good name for a serious man.

You met him early on. You were on a tour of the plantation office, the administrative hub dedicated to the management and oversight of Malawi's greatest natural resources, Viphya Forest Reserve.

It had seen better days.

Absent door handles with dusty red bricks as makeshift stops to prevent doors from swinging back and forth when the sharp plateau winds came rushing through windows missing half their panes.

Mechanical debris, spent filament. Dusty binders from better times replete with graphs and numbers, haphazardly stacked on empty office shelves.

A massive raised relief map with little orange pins for fire stations, most no longer active. Irreparable transmitters laid across workshop tables, never to be heard from again.

What do you call a place marked by suspension?

(You think of Simmel's "Ruin" (1911), which you still have not read. Then you think of *Civil Society and the Postcolonial Imagination in Africa* (1999), which you probably have not read closely enough.)

What kinds of imaginings envelop those that serve civil society across postcolonial Africa?

The figure of the civil servant playing bawo comes to mind (as this is the scene where you were first introduced to Chimomo).

The bawo playing civil servant can be approached as both staple and symptom. There is an intention by the state to offer a service; there is a living person there ready to deliver that service; but the resources are largely unavailable to ensure service will be delivered.

So, people (men, mostly) play bawo—they play bawo for hours, they play bawo again-and-again. You see this across sectors—police, education, healthcare, energy, defense… Everywhere people playing the board game, everyone looking to pass time.

And within this context of time passing (and considering the promises, desires, and expectations that arrives on the back of modern life), corruption and privatization begin to look less like moral or social shortcomings, and more like vectors where things (at the very least) can happen. Where things (at the very least) are moving (particularly for those unsatisfied with moving in circles).

*Scoop, ping-ping-ping-ping … SLAP!*

"How to manage?" This becomes a central question for those burdened by hope and ambition, ceaselessly chafed by the maze of apparent impossibilities experienced under the rubric of the workaday world.

For Chimomo, the answer was not bawo.

Lead out of the Plantation Manager's office by Mr. Simengwa, past a rusty flag pole at the center where the national flag (before the sun had changed to

risen and back again to rising) waved above, you strolled past empty kraals where Jersey cows once produced buckets of fresh milk daily, making your way toward the massive junkyard stationed behind the plantations offices, where lay, among many, many other things, the wreckage of the lorry from the road accident suffered by the secondary school football team a few months before your arrival, a gnarly sculpture presaging the deadly accidents to come.

*Scoop, ping-ping … SLAP!*

A handful of men at the gate, standing, in horseshoe formation, around two men straddling a narrow, pew-like bench, facing one another, a Bawo board between them.

*Scoop—pause—ping-ping…*

"Mr. Price, are you familiar with Bawo?"

"A bit—I learned to play during my training in Chitedze."

"Would you like next game?"

"No, but thank you. Maybe another time…"

"How do you feel about chess?"

"I like chess."

Without missing a beat, the man who asked you about chess—a serious man with serious posture wearing a neat grey BMW jacket—stepped immediately and deliberately over the end of the pew-like bench, making his way inside the tail end of the office complex through a nearby open doorway.

You waited curiously.

Moments later, he emerged carrying a travel chess set. He then pulled over another pew-like bench.

"Can we play?" he asked, with a wry smile. You felt obliged, and sat down on another pew-like bench he had just pulled over.

He sat down, quickly, across from you and set up the board the way a surgeon or chef might set up her knives. First, unlock and open the board; next, set the pieces aside along the wooden bench for a moment, ensuring none of them fall to the dusty ground below; third, set the board right side up in the space between you and him, attempting to locate, through brief trial and error, the flattest service possible on an otherwise rickety bench; fourth, set up the pieces, one by one—two rows of pawns first, for some reason.

Minutes later, after three successive defeats, you retire.

"Mr. Chimomo has claimed another victim."

"Perhaps I should focus on Bawo!"

"No, Bawo is not a real game. There are too few options in Bawo. In chess, the options are so wide. It is very complicated. You must really think."

"Well, I am sorry I did not give you much to think about."

"No, you have potential. You have just not been playing. For me, I play every day, so I am ready."

"Well that comes as some relief."

"You should come over to my house and we can play more. You are most welcome. You are staying in near the ADMARC, yes?"

"Yes, the last boys' quarters on the lower road, just before dam."

"Yes, we are not far. We stay in in one of the EH6 houses on the. Mazolo, your fellow teacher, is our neighbor. Come anytime."

Chimomo was not his birth name, you would learn later. It was Mwalwamba, a typical Nkhonde name (identifiable by the 'Mw' prefix).

During the height of the Kamuzu era, there were carefully maintained geographical (and, by extension, tribal) quotas for admission into the dozen or so "government secondary schools" around the nation. These were excellent schools: well-equipped, well-maintained, well-staffed.

Although there were other institutions of learning at the time called Distant Education Centers (DECs)—what came to be called, decades later, Community Day Secondary Schools (CDSSs)—DECs were not really schools so much as simple structures that usually housed little more than a pile of dated exam guides.

Finding a place at a government secondary school, then, was pivotal if one hoped to make a life outside the realm of subsistence farming or piecework labor. But competition for places was fierce. And due to the quota system, which stipulated proportional representation based on population regardless of performance, students from the Northern Region were at a distinct disadvantage when it came to selection because not only were there relatively more of them sitting for exams then their peers in the Central and Southern Regions, but also because they tended to perform better.

Many of your Northern friends were fond of remarking that this was because Northerners possessed a natural superiority to those in the Central and Southern Regions (an example of what many Malawians would call Northern elitism); but the fact of the matter was that Scottish missionaries from the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP), who established their main mission up north in Livingstonia, invested in education throughout the North in ways other missionaries did not in the Center and South. Additionally, it was often suggested

that because land was less arable in the North, there was less incentive for young people to leave school for agricultural work, as many would do in the relatively flat and fertile Central and Southern Regions.

As a tactical response to the quota system, when it came time to sit for their primary school leaving certificate exams, some students changed their recognizably Northern surnames (Tumbuka and Nkonde mostly) to more generic Central and Southern surnames (Chewa and Nyanja mostly) to improve their chances of selection.

This was why Nelson Mwalwamba, a young man from a relatively small village nestled between the Chitipa Road and a dramatic bend in the North Rukuru river, entered a primary school exam room, aged twelve, the only son of a father not long deceased, and wrote “Nelson Chimomo” instead of “Nelson Mwalwamba” on the cover of his exam.

With a few strokes of his ballpoint, he rendered himself someone for whom the quota system was no longer an obstacle.

“Nelson Chimomo” could have been from almost anywhere south of Kasungu, north of Zomba and East of Mangochi.

Unobtrusive, yet strong and direct—a name that would trigger very little.

Erasure as hope, shape-shifting as pragmatism—perhaps this was the key measure of the exam, after all.)

Chimomo who was selected to Mzuzu Government, one of the finest secondary schools in the nation; the name stuck.

You visited his home a few days after receiving the invitation. The front door was slightly ajar.

Inside—a scratchy radio telling the news, photos behind a glass case on a shelf in a cabinet with plenty of dinnerware, a calendar from two or three years ago on the far wall sponsored by a car insurance company—the usual.

“*Odi*,” you say softly. “*Odini*…” with a gentle knock.

Outside—a woman at work paused, rinsed her hands, slipped on her green plastic slippers, and ducked inside the kitchen.

“*Njilani*!” she says, opening the door as far as it will go, until it bumps into the edge of the rectangular dinner table that hardly fits into the room.

Craning her neck around the door, she invites you to sit down.

Turning your body sideways, you squeeze in. Sit down. Pass her a bag of tomatoes. “Tomatoes! Thank you. We can always use tomatoes,” she responds, with grace, before closing the door and disappearing outside.

Plates clattering. The radio. Before you: a small room full of polished and upholstered furnishing leaving little space for movement.

Acquisition at odds with extent—a recurring motif, but also the materialization of hope (you would like to believe).

Little feet patter in. A little girl, aged five or six, has entered. In the narrow space between the couch and the coffee table, she kneels beside you. Looking down and away, she extends her right hand, with her left hand rested on the crook of her right forearm.

"M*weuli*?" she says.

"*Tili makola, kwalimwe*?" you reply.

"*Tili makola*," she replies.

(A pause.)

"How are-a you?" she says.

"I am fine. How are you?" you reply.

(Another pause.)

"I am fine," she says—a hint of pride in a bashful smile.

She gets up and darts away.

At the end of the dinner table, a toddler grinning at you, his fingers in his mouth. You say hello, ask him his name.

"Philly!" he shouts through his fingers.

The bedroom door opens, Chimomo enters, closing the door behind him. He weaves through the complex of furniture, sits in the loveseat opposite you, and welcomes you into his home. Philip joins him there. Lucia returns and stands beside you. Glory enters the room carrying a serving tray equipped with a tall red thermos, a glass bowl of sugar, Nido powdered milk (in the can), three empty porcelain cups, Nescafé (also in the can), along with a plate of boiled sweet potatoes, piled in a pyramid, and piping hot.

You could not have known, at that moment, that you had discovered your home away from home for the next two years; but you had, and it was essential in ensuring your forward momentum during a challenging time.

Most evenings, after having your dinner and taking your bath, you would stroll over to the Chimomos.

After dusk, main compound transformed into a field of swinging mbaulas. Fiery embers flashed against the backdrop of the dark forest as the cool Viphya air stoked red-yellow fires contained in handmade orbs swung up and down, back and forth, mostly by women and children, many of whom had searched long and hard for the dwindling charcoal alight within.

Energy, Chimomo had so very much of it. You sensed it about him, but Glory was the first to indicate that it might be a liability:

"He does not sleep at night Price, he just lies there."

"Doing what?"

"Thinking... Mr. Chimomo is very frustrated."

"With what?"

"He cannot advance in the plantation without going for his degree. It is very frustrating, and there is very little for him to do there anyhow."

"Aren't there any scholarships or fellowships you can apply for?" you say, turning to Chimomo.

The children had gone to bed. Just you, he and Glory, sitting around the fire, after another round of chess, taking tea.

He laughs, gets up, and walks into the bedroom.

"He will show you now Price…" Glory says, pointing her finger at you, as if in warning.

Chimomo emerges from the bedroom with a heavy stack of papers and puts them before you. You start to leaf through. Variations on a theme. Letters with letterhead from universities across the Western world inviting Chimomo to come, should he be able to find the funds.

"I am doing less of these now than I used to," Chimomo notes, sitting back, appraising them.

The problem for Mr. Chimomo is not getting accepted into these programs, Glory says, it is the funding, of course.

"I remember the first of these I received. I was so excited Price. Until I realized there was no way."

"Can't the ministry help you?" you ask, naively.

He laughs, then Glory laughs.

"I think you know the Ministry is so poor these days Price," Glory says.

"You see the wildfires these past seasons," Chimomo adds. "There are so many. No one is on the fire towers anymore; and even if they were, we don't have working radios to communicate properly with them. And besides, most of these fires are set by former employees."

"Yes, I heard something about this," you inject.

"Yes, they are not getting their pensions as Muluzi has promised them. They are staying. And then they start drinking, and because they are angry, they

set fires."

"As protest," you say.

"Is that a protest, or is that just stupidity? This is our forest. It is what we have. We should be cultivating it; but instead, we are destroying it," Chimomo replied. It disturbed him, truly. He was committed, saw so much potential in the forest. Respected it as an organism. Understood its management as both a science and art.

Not long after you started coming over regularly, he invited you to visit him at the plantation office to show you the progress he had made on his nursery. You strolled past the junkyard along a poorly tended escarpment before ducking the forest down a narrow path where there was, suddenly, a clearing.

A glorious little minor expanse set within the forest. A circle, maybe 150 feet in diameter, with hundreds and hundreds of saplings carefully set into small, black plastic guards, standing in attention, soaking up whatever sun made it through the fast-moving cloud cover above the tree line.

"This is what I have been working on. We have been doing tests and these are all taken from a certain varietal in the forest which has proven more resilient than others. It has taken a lot of work to find these. I have been working with only a few men."

"When can they be planted?" you ask.

"They are ready, but the problem now is transport and petrol. We need to take these deep inside the forest to a particular place, and the roads have not been serviced, so it's a challenge. But I am hoping soon, maybe month end…"

Month end came and passed. Months passed. You would discuss it with him in the evenings now and again. The longer it went on, the more difficult it was for him to talk about it. Until one day you asked and he responded:

"It's all gone."

"What? How?"

"I was told to destroy them," he said with a carefully curated smile. "They were outgrowing the pods and the PM said there was no chance we would have the petrol to plant them, and that it was a waste of time."

"Maybe next year?" you ask.

"No, I think I will not do that again." he said, simply.

Things were getting similar on the education front.

For years, Chimomo had been researching BSC programs in forestry, soliciting information by post, receiving bulk packages, painstakingly filling out

applications, and investing a portion of his income in submission. But it was beginning to seem like a fool's errand—a waste of time and money.

Instead of researching forestry programs, he had begun to focus on chess: playing hours a day with whomever was willing. The problem, of course, was that so few people could challenge him. Mr. Botha could always give him a good game, but he had gotten sick, retreated into his home, and would soon be dead (at his funeral, you and Chimomo would regret not having visited him more often). Mr. Mhone, an aggressive player who, once in a while, could get Chimomo on the back foot from the outset, had resumed his drinking and was spending most of his time in a small village along the escarpment drinking *kachusu*, singing and dancing. You refined your game and would play 2-4 games a night, but never amounted to much more than an amateur. On the occasions when you did beat him (a 1 in 20 occurrence) you always suspected it was because he was distracted, thinking of other things.

At no point during your stay did Chimomo ever ask you for any financial support. This was extraordinary, as most everyone else you knew well would ask you for something at some point—and with good reason.

It came up on evening. Earlier in the day Glory had arrived at your house with a screaming Philip held awkwardly in her arms.

"Mr. Price, hello," she said calmly, as Philip squirmed and wailed in agony as bright red blood poured slowly from the tip of his toe. "Would it be possible for you to borrow me some items from your medical kit?"

After opening the kit and holding Philip while Glory cleaned and bandaged the wound that had resulted from the boy learning a lesson about the dangers of axes, you turned into your home and demanded she take a handful of money to enable her to visit a private clinic for stiches. That night, Chimomo thanked you for the assistance and immediately handed you an envelope with the precise amount of money you had given Glory earlier in the day.

"This is unnecessary, stop."

"Not at all Mr. Price, thank you for helping at a difficult moment. It was only that Glory did not have the time to be able to find me for these funds."

"Well, she didn't ask, it was a gift, so you must accept it. And, besides, you have never asked me for any assistance."

"No, we are friends. Besides, I know the problems that your own family is experiencing at home. And I know you have made a great sacrifice to come here.

It is very serious to lose one's home. At least we have our home in Karonga – we can always return there. I worry about you, to be honest, Price."

At the tail end of your service, Mzuzu University, a private college that had only recently been established, announced an accelerated 3-year BSC program in Forestry. Only one hour away from Chikangawa, it would be Chimomo's best shot – as he could take a leave of absence from the Forestry Department, and Glory could remain in Chikangawa with the children. You promised to raise the funds and, upon return, wrote up a donor prospectus with compelling narrative and photographs which you produced at a Kinko's and mailed, by post, to all your friends and relatives. It was enough. He graduated with honors, and returned to Chikangawa, a manger, three years later.

By then you were enrolled in a graduate program in anthropology. It was hard to return to America. You spent weeks driving around visiting people, then months working at a used bookstore in Boston. When the college loans that had been in deferment starting coming in, you signed up for AmeriCorps to give you some space to apply to graduate programs. By day you organized afterschool programs for Big Brothers/Big Sisters of Metro Chicago; by night you drank coffee at a 24-hour diner across the street from Kimball Station called the Huddle House Grill, leafing through grad program literature and reading Bohannan and Glazer's *High Points in Anthropology* (1988). Meantime, your parents were back in New Jersey. They had lost their home and were renting. There was never any demand or expectation for you to help. It was a difficult choice between sociology and anthropology. You felt confident in the former, but not the latter. Anthropology had been a real nuisance to you as an undergrad, but your time in Malawi had changed the way you thought the world: the weight of histories, the muddle of human action and inaction, and the certainty and ubiquity of unintended consequence were all now foregrounded. Contingency, ambiguity and ambivalence were no longer hindrances, but essential tools for thoughtful engagement. You were not less passionate, only less strident. Things were fraught. The time for easy answers had passed. In its wake, there were only, what R.G. Collingwood called, "the realities of the situation:"

> Scissors-and-paste history, with its ideal of obtaining from authorities ready-made information about a dead past, obviously could not teach man to control human situations as natural science had taught him to control the forces of Nature; nor could any such distilled

> essence of scissors-and-paste history as had been proposed by August Comte under the name of sociology; but there seemed to be some chance that the new kind of history might prove able to do so. [Collingwood 1939: 106]

In anthropology, there did seem to be that chance, as beguiling as the discipline struck you. An old professor of yours suggested a doctoral program in anthropology where you could learn filmmaking and also study under one of the more formidable Africanists in the nation. "There is no one like him," you remember the old professor exclaiming with an almost sinister laugh, "A real character. Very difficult, but brilliant. And if you are looking for someone that tells it like it is—he's your man." You thought you were, bought his book, and were struck by how someone with such a reputation could write with such fluidity and elegance. Still unsure about the discipline, you came to the end of his ethnography and found the following about the nature of fieldwork and anthropology:

> Fieldwork is culturally subversive. It temporarily detaches one from one's way of thinking and doing, yet it never entirely connects to an alternate one. It fosters one's imagination about both. The better one empathizes, the better one does ethnography, yet full absorption and empathy within another world would inhibit social insight. For these reasons, one could argue that anthropology… is a tragic discipline in that it goes far to isolate and alienate its practitioners from full conviction in their own mode of thinking and doing. [Beidelman 1993: 214]

That was how you felt at the time: isolated and alienated (as absurd as that sounds now). You began to imagine anthropology as a disciplined space of subversion where you could cultivate the tragic vision of the world you had acquired over the last few years. You submitted an application, the old professor wrote you a letter and made some phone calls, and before you knew it—you were in—sitting at an oblong seminar room table debating time and the other. But things did not go as planned. You gravitated toward the old Africanist, and, without realizing it, began to mold yourself off of him: cultivating a skeptical bitterness towards post-structuralism, the hyper-professionalization of the discipline, tightly networked sub-fields, and the proliferation of neologisms. Such

a stance may have been inspired and to some degree quaint, but ultimately it proved to be more naïve, puerile, annoying, and crass. When the old Africanist opined that the only good thing about AIDS was that it killed a certain French theorist, you laughed. It should go without saying that you should not have laughed (even if you did tell yourself that his sharing the same sexual orientation as the French theorist and having lived through the 80s gave him the privilege to utter such a string of words). In fact, you should have been repulsed; but you were not. Why? Because you clung to your narrative, instead. You had chosen him and he had chosen you and that bond was formed in a sincere space of inquiry outside the corporatist mainstream of the academic entrepreneur. You would be his last student, tracing your lineage back through him to Evans-Pritchard, Malinowski and Seligman. And through your sublime prose, you would defend an approach to anthropology that privileged rigorous fieldwork as a prerequisite to the composition of an ethnography based on meticulous description which wove elegant and comprehensible theory throughout the text en route to making a lasting contribution to world literature. In short, under his wing, you would write a work for the ages—above and beyond the petty vicissitudes and trendy fashions of whatever the academe had become. In short, you were going to be a savior. And, of course, you were not about to be (nor should you have hoped to have been one). When it came time to develop a project you suggested studying the trials and tribulations of your former secondary school students: “What did it mean to be a school leaver in Malawi? Students who no longer were interested in agrarian living alone but who now dreamed of business, law, and medicine? What did it mean to have embraced a promise that would reveal itself to be not much more than a fantasy? How does one make their way in the wake of such a betrayal?” This was during an advising session. You remember the old Africanist looking at you as if you had just served him cold soup on a winter’s day. “What are you going to say? That it sucks to be them?” Yes, of course, a poor project, back to the drawing board—more pitches followed: AIDS orphans, forest conservation, road safety, currency devaluation, uranium mining, oil exploration, internet technologies—none were attractive to the old Africanist. Despairing, you turned to him one day and said, “What should I do then? Tell me.” Submission, a pause—a long pause—a sip from his cocktail at the bar, and then: “No one has ever done a proper ethnography of an African mental hospital or an African prison.” Ok! you said. Ok. And went away. At the library, minutes later, you googled “African mental hospital.” The first hit read: “BBC NEWS | AFRICA | Ethiopia’s nail eater highlights malaise.” You clicked on it. The first thing that

appeared was an image of a pile of nails. “The shocking contents of the Ethiopian man’s stomach,” the caption read. “A 40-year-old Ethiopian man is recovering in hospital after surgeons in Addis Ababa removed 222 metallic objects from his stomach,” the article began:

> Gazehegn Debebe was admitted to Tibebu General Hospital last week after complaining of continuous vomiting.
>
> After intensive investigation, doctors opened his stomach to find an assortment of 15 cm nails, door keys, hair pins, coins and even watch batteries.
>
> Doctors at the hospital say it's incredible that Gazahegn's stomach could contain all these objects.
>
> “He had over 750 grams of metal inside his stomach. He must have been eating these objects for at least two years, as the wall of his stomach had thickened to accommodate all the inedible objects," said Dr Samuel.
>
> Some of the nails found were 15 cm in length and doctors say that they are shocked that the patient could have swallowed these without perforating his gut.
>
> His brother and sister said that they had no idea that Gazahegn was eating metal.
>
> "He was never fussy about food. He ate whatever we put in front of him, but we had no idea that he was eating metal," they told doctors at the clinic.
>
> It is unclear why Gazehegn was eating nails and other objects, but his family say he has a history of mental illness.

The story went on to outline the gross need for improvements in public health capacities for the mentally ill. Noting that, “Almost 6% of the 63 million population are believed to suffer from mental disorders, but facilities as well as skilled manpower is scarce.” It struck a chord. You were spending plenty of time those days in hospitals. Your grandmother had been institutionalized after another breakdown. Your father was in rehabilitation after a stroke. He was also being treated for depression. It felt personal and relevant but also (and this is key) possibly beautiful, which is a strange thing to say but (and this only appears crucial in retrospect) you had recently seen a film called *The House is Black*, a short documentary made in 1962 by the Iranian poet Forough Farrokhzad about a

leprosarium in Azerbaijan, and it had affected you deeply—so much so, in fact, that you had just finished writing a 50-something page review essay of the 20 minute film for a course that only required a 10-12 page final paper, in which you wrote:

> *Farrokhzad was particularly proud of the trust she gained from the lepers in Tabriz. This, of course, was no small task considering the threat of contagion, the lepers' spatial remove from society, centuries of naturalized and pathologized social stigma, along with the fact that a vast majority of the patients were not Persian... In other words, it would have been difficult for Farrokhzad and her crew to have encountered a group of people within a relatively short distance that were any more "other." As a result, she was forced to negotiate (in a particularly short amount of time) complex oppositions between health and disease, ethnic majority and ethnic minority, the beautiful and the grotesque, urban and rural, man and woman, rich and poor, and privileged and damned.*
>
> *In twelve short (or, presumably, very long) days, Farrokhzad accomplished this great feat through a bridging of these difficult divides. She won the lepers' trust and gained remarkable access to some of the most intimate moments of their lives. She took her camera inside homes, classrooms, hospitals, and even mosques. She filmed women alone brushing their hair and applying their makeup. She filmed men laying prostrate in praise of God and small boys in the rapture of a ball game. She filmed women breastfeeding their children and a man staring sentimentally at autumn leaves floating in a pond. In short, only by making herself fully open and available to her subjects did she disappear into the scenery. By making herself fully visible she became invisible. By exposing herself (that is, by risking contagion and sharing her poetry and living amongst the patients for nearly two weeks), she exposed the other.*

This was very sincere, and also very deluded. (Though you wonder if that observation is telling of an ironic distance cultivated in the years since writing those words. Is it? Do you now proceed from a mode of skepticism which is principally defensive? If so, what kind of being emerges from that manner of writing/thinking/reading? For instance, could you ever write, let alone circulate,

anything like that again?) Regardless, it should come as little surprise that you were attracted to the possibility of exposure via the other, which is why the figure of the mental hospital must have appeared so attractive at the time. You knew there was one in Zomba, the old colonial capital. And you discovered that Megan Vaughan had written an article about its emergence as an extension of the state prison. You told the old Africanist that this is what you wanted to do, and he seemed pleased. You got to work, reading everything you could on the matter. Then you drafted an MA thesis that began with a lead about the place of madness across African literature. It began:

> *The final moments in Chinua Achebe's* Arrow of God (1964) *chronicle the tragic demise of Ezeulu, chief priest of Umuaro. An outspoken critic of the invasion of a nearby village, Ezeulu intervenes against popular opinion only to find himself incarcerated by the colonial authorities who demand he accept a bureaucratic position in the indirect rule of his people. He refuses; and finds himself detained by the British forces for several months, wherein he is unable to initiate the crucial festival that christens the annual harvest. Upon his release, the people of Umuaro - their crops rotting in the ground, their children going hungry - beg him to make an exception to their time-honored traditions. But whether out of loyalty or spite, Ezeulu again refuses. The harvest is delayed for another three months, the village elders grow irate, and the people starve. Alas, the center cannot hold. The sudden and unexpected death of Ezeulu's most beloved son is interpreted by the community as a sign of the chief priest's spiritual impotence. The populace abandons him (along with their patron god) in favor of a Christian church that will permit them to harvest the few edible crops that remain. Rebuked and dishonored, Ezeulu can find solace only in the fog of madness.*

The old Africanist, a great lover of Achebe and of this book in particular, which was no doubt why you chose to begin with it, on a certain level, was disgusted by this approach. He deemed your work unprofessional and circuitous, unfocused and dilettantish. You were a terrible acolyte. You tried to redeem yourself, revising for months—groping for a voice, searching for a formula. Your concerns, initially, were broad and lyrical: "Ezeulu's fate is by no means uncommon in modern African dramaturgy," you had continued,

> *The canon is rife with characters driven – for one reason or another - into madness). Overwhelmed by weighty psychosocial stressors - dispossession, familial alienation, incomprehensible social change, and contrasting roles or contradictory obligations - many of the most memorable characters in modern African fiction breach the boundaries of sanity and plunge headlong into that abyss called madness. Such disastrous ends make compelling narratives in and of themselves; yet they also mark important challenges to (and reflections of) the social situations from whence they came. This is, perhaps, why madness has proven to be such a potent idiom for the arts in modern Africa: madness both reflects and resists states of disequilibrium - and who would deny that many contemporary African societies are battling with different forms of social disintegration?*

This was all wrong—you were not training to be a literary critic; you were training to be an anthropologist; you would never get a grant if you were not building off the current theory—the old Africanist said, scolding you. What were you thinking? How could you be so foolish? You needed to locate yourself in the contemporary moment. (How could you ever think of abjuring it?) What were people looking at? People were looking at the global flow in psycho-pharmaceuticals; people were also looking at subjectivity; and, of course, people were looking at the postcolonial… so you reframed the project around the question of the nature and management of an emergent postcolonial pharmacological personhood. You did not quite know what this meant. But it seemed not to matter. It was more about keywords, index and cadence. The goal was to remove an obstacle via compositional technique. ("Chimomo" not "Mwalwamba" remember?) Speaking of which, on an elevator one day a faculty member asks you what you will be doing after you leave the program. You ask him what he is talking about. He looks concerned and invites you into his office. Did you not know that the old Africanist had told the faculty at a meeting that he would no longer work with you? This was several months back after all… You did not. What happens in the wake of a failed conversion? What happens when a narrative is stripped away before you realize it is gone? How to continue to move in the face of a seemingly immovable obstacle? Ironically, a return to your initial research questions about school leavers; predictably, a foreshadowing of the

research questions to come. After confirming with the Old Africanist that you were no longer wanted, you cleaned up your transcript, finished the film you were making as part of your certificate course, dutifully taught your final classes, and walked away, suspecting you would never return to academic anthropology again. You were devastated, broke, and had not yet cultivated a viable vision for the future. Luckily, there would be help.

During your Peace Corps service, while on holiday at Livingstonia, you met an old Northern Irish doctor named Donald Brownlie.

Small in stature with sharp features, deep eyes, and salt-and-pepper hair, Dr. Brownlie had only just returned to Malawi after having been expelled in 1980 for reasons still unclear to you. Kamuzu's death, and the shift to multi-party democracy, meant he could return to his post in Livingstonia after years in exile practicing medicine at a missionary hospital in Uganda. He appeared delighted to be back. "This is where God wants me to be," he said.

David Gordon Memorial Hospital was established by Scottish Presbyterians in 1910, some 16 years after Dr. Robert Laws famously christened Livingstonia Mission atop a stunning plateau some 3000 feet above Lake Malawi, high above the masses of mosquitoes that had taken the lives of so many of his European predecessors along the lakeshore.

Fresh out of college with your sociology and anthropology degree, you counted yourself and expert amateur ethnographer, so when you crossed paths with anyone "of interest" during your two years, you would ask them for an interview—Dr. Brownlie a case in point.

Over the two years you amassed boxes of cassettes containing dozens of interviews. (Where are they now? You wonder.) Lost forever, perhaps.

All that is left may only be memories you did not know were there. Of which, two come to mind, when you think of Dr. Brownlie.

The first is the image of an elderly doctor climbing atop a desk to pull down a shade to offer some relief to a bedridden patient who appeared to be uncomfortable from the sun streaming in, with you, offering to help, but he politely refusing. The second involves the 15km single gravel track road that connects Livingstonia, at the top of the plateau, to Chitimba, at the lakeshore below—a road which features 21 switchbacks, and which can be very difficult to secure a lift up or down. Dr. Brownlie, on your final day in Livingsonia, had generously offered you a lift down the steep escarpment, and, along the way, an overloaded vehicle chugging painfully up the mountain was honking furiously and

flashing its lights, begging you to stop instead of passing. You remember Dr. Brownlie saying, “oh my,” stopping his vehicle, putting it in park, lifting the emergency break, and exiting as people rushed out of the other vehicle when they realized it was him. Then him being pulled up into the flatbed of the truck before ducking below a horseshoe of bodies, and then the immense chorus of screams and cries and wails as Dr. Brownlie stood up, nodded his head grimly after having, presumably, inspected the patient they were carrying in the back of their truck who they had been bringing to the hospital for emergency treatment. And then, a middle-aged man, screaming and shaking, tears pouring down his face, who walked into the bush, grabbing branches indiscriminately off trees, as others rushed over to arrest him, and after sitting him down in the rocky bush, holding him as he wept and heaved.

Strangely enough, it was not something in your interview with Dr. Brownlie that proved formative, but an offhand comment made shortly thereafter, when he discovered you were from the New York City area.

“When you go home, you should look up a man called Arnold Wendroff,” he told you, referring to a retired New York City public school teacher who had completed his dissertation research in medical sociology near the mission.

“Arnold was a Peace Corps Volunteer like yourself—only many years ago. He’s a good man—worth finding.”

Indeed. When you moved to New York for graduate school years later you remembered this somehow, leafed through your files, found Wendroff’s contact information, reached out to him, and received an invitation to visit him at his Park Slope home, and hit it off. Several months later you were living in his basement “guest” apartment, paying a truly merciful amount of rent, surrounded by books and boxes upon boxes of his research, most of which, yet to be analyzed.

Arnie’s dissertation, “Trouble-shooters and Troublemakers: Witchfinding and Traditional Malawian Medicine” (1985), is an oft-cited text in Malawianist literature dealing with witchcraft and sorcery. It features an impressive amount of primary data collected among a set of *nchimis* and *ngangas* (often translated as witch-finders and herbalists, respectively). Apart from featuring the kind of detailed, exhaustive qualitative data you rarely seen these days, the dissertation is unique in that his archival research was not conducted in colonial, state or municipal institutions, but in traditional ones. *Nchimis* and *ngangas*, it turns out, could be assiduous record keepers. Arnie managed to tap into an extraordinary set of collections. The bounded, light-blue, paperback dissertation has been sitting on your shelf for years, mostly undisturbed. You open it and leaf through.

You remember that Arnie wrote the thing in two hour intervals each morning before leaving to teach at a New York City public middle school, devoting the summer months to travelling back and forth to Malawi in order to conduct his research, which he fully funded himself. A labor of love, a real contribution. You leaf through some more. There is reference to complex therapeutic management logs featuring diagnoses and treatment, but what strikes your attention in particular are a handful of short letters between clients and healers which have been reproduced in full. Two resonate: the first, a letter of gratitude from a divinity student who presumably visited an *nchimi* during a school holidays after initially encountering trouble at school; the second, a letter to an *nganga* from a senior church official who is quietly inquiring into the possibility of seeking therapy outside the scope of biomedicine and the church. Arnie uses them in his study to make a rather (now) banal point about medical pluralism; but you find them rather compelling in-and-of themselves, stripped of this analytical frame.

Balaka Bible School,
17th April 1979

Dear [Nchimi] Lipuka

… I can't forget you for what you did for me. … I was well welcomed by masters who are teaching us now here. For that thing you helped me really works. Each and everyone are very happy with me. They always respect me.

I have now proved exactly that your medicine you gave me was true. I don't face any trouble of provocation from my friends. When they see me, they are just trembling themselves through what you gave me.

While I am here, I am always praying for you to God that He must add some more days [for you] to live on earth.

I can be very glad if you can reply to my letter soon.

I think I will hear more from you.

With constant remembrance,

David Luhanga
[1985: 217]

Dear Father (Nganga Tyapula],

Keep cool if I did not tell what I exactly wanted. The main thing is that I want your help as always. The help is that I want to be lucky with the life.

[He relates three instances in which he was passed over for promotion and for advanced studies oversees]

All these have forced me to ask you so that you should help me with the medicine for good luck. Even if I have that, everything is in the power of God.

I will be there on 16th of July.

I am yours,
Edward. S. Gombwe
[1985: 218]

It's a shame letters are not really permitted to speak for themselves in the context of Arnie's manuscript, you think to yourself. But why would they? One might ask, you think.

This *is* a work of medical sociology, after all (a dissertation, nonetheless), and as such, according to convention, the letters are strategically marshalled in the service of a claim about the status and function of the figure of the *nchimi* within the context of economic factors that impact *nchimi* utilization, a claim that is made in the service of a rather bold cultural critique of traditional healing more generally.

The troubleshooter's overt role is to unravel a trouble and eliminate it. However, in so doing, troubleshooters such as nganga, and more especially nchimi, may play the latent role of troublemaker insofar as their cure frequently depends on wrongly ascribing blame for the

> victim's trouble to an innocent person who is branded sorcerer as a consequence of their spurious divinations. [1985: 321]

This is an interesting reversal. Here, Arnie attempts to destabilize and discredit certain claims to efficacy and legitimacy made by (and about) many of his principle subjects—many of whom he pretty much tries to expose as charlatans. (This may account for why this was a dissertation written in medical sociology and not medical anthropology—the goal appears to have been to marshal evidence to delineate objective truth in order to provide the basis for sweeping moral assertions that might lead to moral clarity and actionable intervention. In this framework, presence and relativism, listening and seeing, demonstration and evocation, analysis and interpretation appear as devices, not to appreciate contingency and evoke possibility, but the opposite.) This is precisely the kind of claim that you would have gravitated toward as an undergrad (following your first conversion), but would have been repulsed by as a grad student (following your second conversion). But in the wake of that repulsion, what would you have missed? The answer is compelling from the more agnostic position you find yourself in now. And that answer could be, among other things: *the usefulness of the concept of trouble within fields constrained by precarity and duress*. "Compelling" because it appears that Arnie may have been far ahead of his time (in so far as this is possible within the circular context of knowledge production). For one of the dominant theoretical problems at the time of your writing your dissertation is that of "trouble," and what to do with it; and while it is clear that a popular tactic for people is to avoid trouble through denial, distraction, or deferral (or a mix of all three), and though Arnie appears to be bent, at least in his dissertation, on disabusing it, Donna Haraway (2016) has recently claimed that the key to living through our contemporary moment is "staying with the trouble" in a monograph that "argues and tries to perform that, …

> …eschewing futurism, staying with the trouble is both more serious and more lively. Staying with the trouble requires making oddkin; that is, we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles. We become-with each other or not at all. That kind of material semiotics is always situated, someplace and not noplace, entangled and worldly. [2016: 4]

Seen in this light, your position in Arnie's guest apartment was fortuitous. Having witnessed the dissolution of your relationship with the Old Africanist, having seen you spiral, relatively swiftly, into a well of trouble, this person, who was, in a sense not so very oddkin, but oddkin enough, would be key in helping you eschew the absence of a future by offering you a bridge toward a material semiotics that was not no place but some place (all too familiar), after all. Which is to say that, after explaining to him your loss and expressing real doubt about where and how the trouble arose and where it would lead, Arnie would step in and provide for your next step—a return passage to Malawi, in an effort to engage in the speculative research you had proposed and longed to conduct. And so, not long after leaving that program, you boarded your second flight back to Malawi, about the time you expected to go, but under very different circumstances, leaving for Arnie a note, in constant remembrance, not dissimilar to that of David Luhanga.

You arrived at the mental hospital approximately 72 hours after boarding the flight at JFK having not finished *Tristes Tropiques*, yet again. No layover in Jo'burg or Amsterdam this time. For the most part, straight through to Lilongwe, where you no longer were surprised to see the Jacarandas. There was no chance of saying goodbye to Yunus this time. He and the delegation were out and away before you reached passport control. You waited in line with other technocrats, tourists, missionaries, scientists and speculators, but at least you spoke some Chichewa now. A friend of a friend picked you up at the airport, a technical specialist from Knoxville who worked on parliamentary support and who believed deeply and thoroughly in democracy. A night in Lilongwe, then an early morning hitch to Zomba via Zalewa, then a week looking for housing with another friend of a friend—an Israeli-American Fulbrighter who was running a program called, "Students with Dreams," in collaboration with UCLA's Art & Global Health Center and the University of Malawi's Theatre Department. You had also been awarded a Fulbright—the IIE not the Hays. At the end of your second year of your second graduate program in anthropology, you were so focused on teaching and managing subtitles for a certain video installation project that you failed to find the time to prepare a worthy dissertation research grant so you shifted your attention to the IIE—a grant for applied work, slightly easier to obtain, with much lass paperwork—in the you hope it would provide you the opportunity to get back to Malawi under institutional cover. Once there, you could give something back, start your research, and apply for more grants. In the section of the application entitled, "FUTURE PLANS (Upon return to the U.S.)" you wrote: "To complete my

Ph.D. in sociocultural anthropology and begin a career as a professional academic anthropologist." Your STATEMENT OF GRANT PURPOSE began:

> *There is a quiet transformation happening in mental health care delivery in Malawi. Initiated by the nation's first and only psychiatrist, with an eye towards utilizing the wealth of human resources about to be made available with the graduation of an inaugural class of psychiatric clinical officers from a national university, the Malawian Ministry of Health has begun the slow, yet crucial process of shifting its approach to mental health care delivery from a centralized, institutional model to a decentralized, community-based model which has proven, around the world, to be more efficacious and humane.*
>
> *My research project, drafted in collaboration with Malawi's Ministry of Health, the University of Malawi's College of Medicine, and an award-winning Malawian NGO, is geared towards assisting Malawian health care professionals in this important transformation and, ultimately, towards improving the quality of mental health care in Malawi, in general. It addresses two of the most significant obstacles in providing effective public mental health care services in Malawi - (1) the pervasive and insipid social stigma surrounding people afflicted with mental disorders, and (2) a widespread dearth of knowledge among the Malawian citizenry regarding pathways to care provided by the state. My project strives to achieve a greater understanding of these challenges and attempts to articulate practical solutions to overcome them by asking the following questions: What is character of the social stigmas regarding mental illness in Malawi? How do they operate in everyday life? And what is their impact on mental health care delivery? Moreover, how can these stigmas be confronted via national and public health campaigns? And what are the most effective and efficient ways in which to inform the Malawian citizenry about the services being made available to them in this new, community-based model? In short, this is a project that maps the terrain of a particular social problem in order to aggregate a set of solutions to overcome it.*

Truth be told, you had no interest in stigma. Your research project had moved away from an emphasis on pharmacological personhood and had shifted

into a concern with empathic understanding and its operationalization, a trajectory clearly identified in your field statement on health anthropological approaches to mental disorder in African contexts:

> *Mental disorder in African contexts has received attention mostly from cross-cultural psychiatrists and colonial historians and much of the current literature seems to be coming out of social work and public health. There has been relatively little work published by anthropologists regarding mental disorder in African contexts based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork in the last few decades. This is regrettable for two reasons: first, ethnography should be an important component in crafting comprehensive health policies because it reveals conditions of possibility for action within the context of the complex dialects of health care delivery via an ambivalent form of inquiry that presumes ambiguity but aspires for moral and political clarity, rigorous exposition, and theoretical depth—a unique perspective lacking in much of the current literature with its matter-of-fact bias; second, being a constituent element of human life embedded within a context of rapid change, ethnographic attention to mental disorder in African contexts is likely to be theoretically provocative—undoubtedly with regard to the two current major trajectories in the anthropology of mental disorder (emergent forms of personhood/new political subjectivities, and the global life of pharmaceuticals), but also in relation to some other registers. The absence of contemporary anthropological attention to mental disorder in African contexts may be associated with an institutional wariness that can be linked to the sins of colonial psychiatry and the legacy of what Gaurav Desai (2001) has called "the colonial library". In other words, decades of critique may have made Africanists wary of focusing their attention on mental pathology and the radical alterity inherent in some forms of mental disorder for fear of slipping into the morass of Afro-pessimism, with its historical ties to the colonial gaze.*
>
> *There are a number of ways to productively approach mental disorder in African contexts, however. I have sketched out some of them in the headings of the bibliography, some of which have been all but neglected. For instance, there has been little ethnographic*

*attention devoted to the sociology of psychiatric knowledge or the training and/or experiences of mental health care professionals in African contexts. In this regard, Wendland's (2010) ethnography of socialization in an African mental school could serve as a model, as might Marks' (1994) seminal account of South African nurses. Similarly, there is a lack of ethnographic production at the intersection of gender and mental disorder in Africa (e.g., Spring 1978; Cox 1979, 1983; Cole and Ruthblum 1990; Collins 2001; Nasser, Walders and Jenkins 2002). Moreover, few studies have emerged regarding the potent social and political dramas surrounding the criminalization–medicalization of homosexuality. In this regards, Bayer's (1987) flagship study is provocative. Lastly, there has been a dearth of attention to mental retardation. Edgerton (1984, 1993) offers invaluable starting points here, and Serpell, Mariga and Harvey (1993) make a convincing plea for further research.*

*Several older debates in the social study of mental disorder remain relevant in contemporary African contexts. Institutionalization is an example. Interest in mental institutions in African contexts seems to have been confined to historical accounts of colonial asylums (e.g. Vaughan, 1983; Marks 1999; Sadowsky 1999). The only recent, sustained account of an African mental institution I am aware of is the American psychiatrist Paul Linde's memoir (2002) of his year working in the psychiatric ward at Harare Central Hospital. This lack of attention is strange in light of the wealth of available research regarding the sociology of mental institutions (e.g.; Goffman 1961; Wessen 1964; Scull 1979), not to mention the impassioned debates dealing regarding deinstitutionalization which sprung from questions of deviance and social control and the labeling theory of mental illness (e.g., Basalgia 1964; Scheper-Hughes 1981, 1983, 1987; Scull 1984; Scheper-Hughes and Lovell 1986). Research regarding "the family burden" (e.g., Laing and Esterson 1964; Jenkins and Schumacher 1999) and the challenges of community care (e.g., Hollingshead and Redlich 1958; Nichter 2002) are also in relatively short supply within African contexts. This is unfortunate because community care is a pertinent research area within the contemporary landscape of African mental health care delivery due to moves away from institutionalization. There appears to be little systematic*

*analysis of this important transition. Casey (1997), whose work deals with medical pluralism, and McGruder (2004), whose work is more descriptive than theoretically rich, are unique examples.The semantics of mental health care delivery also demands more attention. Here, the rich literature on the constitution of meaning in ritualized and everyday social practice—whether it be in its emphasis on hermeneutics (e.g., Good 1977; Kleinman 1988; Csordas 1993); ontology (e.g., Fabrega 1993; Young 1995; Amador and Anthony 1998), communicability/discourse (e.g., Mishler 1984; Rhodes 1984; Kirmayer 1993; Wilce 1998, 2009; Briggs 2005) or narrative (e.g., Mattingly 1998)—could easily be activated in African contexts with productive/applied ends. This is an area ripe for theoretical innovation. In particular, I suspect that by conferring close attention onto the dynamic processes associated with making sense of mental disorder, anthropologists can revisit the notion of empathy—not as abstraction or methodological tool, but as dynamic social process with important ramifications. As Hollan and Throop (2008) have suggested, there appears to be a renewed interest in exploring empathy from a variety of interdisciplinary perspectives (e.g., Skultans 2007; Hollan 2008, Throop 2008a, 2008b; Neuman 2010a, 2010b; Shuman 2010). Of all of these approaches, I am most interested in those which treat empathy as a complex social process which confines and narrows perspective as much as it opens and expands. Yair Neuman's work—which revisits Wilfred Bion's (1970) provocative insights into the natural qualities of the ineffable—is a good example of this, as is Shuman's (2010).*

Greater truth be told, you remained attached, first and foremost, to some idea of the beautiful, timeless ethnography—fantasizing about your monograph, *The House is Black*. Which was not the title of your project for this application. No, your title was not lyrical and oblique, nor was it conceptually evocative; instead, it was technical and alliterative: “Media, Mental Health & Modes of Community Sensitization in Malawi.”

(Does it matter that you did not believe, as you wrote in the statement, that “the first step toward establishing a viable public mental health care program in Malawi, however, will be community sensitization,” because you knew, as did most everyone in the know, that the first step toward establishing any viable

program of care in Malawi was not awareness, but substantial investment coupled with incentivized buy-ins? Does it matter that to claim that ultimate solutions to historical problems began in the minds of a quantity of persons who *do not yet know* is to turn a blind eye to a world first mapped by imperial aggression and then measured by neoliberal governance where thoughtful and sophisticated people continue to engage in the practice of living, day-after-day, in spite of it all? Probably not.)

What was important was that you were truly grateful to receive this award, and held onto the hope that the project could do some good; but mostly, you were excited to get to return to Malawi, to get make your way in an anthropology of Africa that you concluded in another field statement, was best understood through the figure of possibility:

> *This figure most readily appears under the banner of critical agency (see Apter 2007 for an excellent elaboration) and within a wide array of forms, such as modes of self-fashioning (e.g., Burke 1996; Comaroff & Comaroff 1997; Macgaffey & Bazenguissa- Ganga 2000), discourse (e.g., Apter 2007), disobedience (e.g., Roitman 2004), comportment (e.g., Boddy 1989; Argenti 2001), narrative (e.g., Graeber 2007), networking (e.g, Clarke 2004), cultural productions (e.g., Klein 2007; Larkin 2008; Comaroff & Comaroff 2009), and secrecy (e.g., Ferme 1999); all of which tend to be enacted in the face of seemingly overwhelming constraints, such as anxiety (Fassin 2007), criminalization and corruption (Bayart, Ellis & Hibou, 1999; Smith 2007), decline and despair (Ferguson 1999), debility and disease (Livingston 2005; Illife 2006; Eaton 2008) disorder (Comaroff & Comaroff 2006), insecurity (Ashforth 2005), poverty (Englund 2006), and violence, war and its concomitant specters (Richards 1996; Ferme 2001; Mamdani 2001; Argenti 2001, Graeber 2007)—in short, what Jon Comaroff has called "the problem of African impossibility" (2002).*
>
> *This approach recognizes (and elucidates) the historical character of entrenched inequalities along with the hegemonic forces embedded in political, social and economic structures without falling into the trap of teleology (or succumbing to hopelessness) because it concurrently highlights novel capacities for creative action which arise in the improvisations of everyday life. This interplay is usually understood through the rubric of dialects and dialogics. By conceiving*

*of the old relationships between structure and agency and society and the individual as dialectical or dialogical, this approach emphasizes the contingent, situated nature of things and highlights the "conditions of possibility" necessary for pragmatic action. In this model, pragmatism is ubiquitous, and can erupt in either the micro-practices of ordinary life, or within the spaces carved out by breaks and disjunctures within the normative (though sometimes, over time, these spaces can develop into something of a shadow or parallel normative—see Roitman 2004, for example). In focusing attention on this give and take while keeping an eye out for wide ranges of possibility, contemporary Africanist anthropologists usually manage to avoid two of the biggest traps germane to the field: Afro-pessimism (compare Gordon and Wolpe 1998 with Rieff 1998) and essentialism (see Appiah 1992 and MacGaffey 1995). While both approaches can be seductive and yield tactical results in applied, political contexts, neither do much in the way of providing fertile ground for adequate theory-building or encourage nuanced accounts of life as it is experienced with all its ambiguity and ambivalence.*

*The middle ground taken up by most contemporary anthropologists of Africa, then, is an approach I would like to call "Afro-ambivalence". For it typically privileges the ambiguous, entangled, heterogeneous qualities inherent in the dynamic processes which make and remake social and cultural fields along the lines of the dichotomous ranges I suggested before. A prerequisite for this kind of research is a kind of "negative capability"—a concept coined by Keats which refers to the unique capacity to accept uncertainties and the elliptical qualities of life; it is similar to what Murray Last has referred to as "knowing about not knowing" (1992). It is an anthropology that is keenly aware of the limits of its checkered past—whether that means the speculation and conjecture of evolutionary or diffusionist approaches, or the essentialism and reductivism associated with French ethnophilosophy and British structural- functionalism—and which has internalized and absorbed the many critiques leveled at the field in the past thirty years (e.g., Asad 1973; Kuklick 1978; Owusu 1978; Fabian 1983; Clifford & Marcus 1986; Mudimbe 1988, 1994; Comaroff & Comaroff 1992; Goody 1995; Mafeje 1998), and which is highly skeptical of*

*expositions and elaborations which arc (often elegantly, but no less problematically) towards any form of heuristic closure.*

*With this "illusion of false coherence" (Comaroff 2002: xi) of the work of the past irrevocably shattered, contemporary ethnographers of Africa have in the last few decades taken up the great challenge in moving "beyond structural models rooted in presuppositions of cultural 'boundedness,' 'homogeneity,' and 'order' so as to appreciate... social life in a more historical and dynamic framework" (Hutchison 1996, 28), in large part by relating "macro analysis to the humble level of kinship relations and their highly variable transformations, which are often concealed by an apparent continuity" (Geschiere 1997, 24). Out of this analytic space—one which presumes discontinuity, and which sits betwixt and between the macro and the micro, structures and agents, ideology and praxis, local and global —comes a "new ethnography of Africa" (Owusu 2000), one which aims to illuminate the transformations which affect the status of postcolonial civil societies (Apter 2007, 141).*

*These "eminently worthy objects of inquiry" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006: vii), have yielded a wide range of results in a variety of areas: "for instance, how currency works in the economic turmoil of West African hyperinflation (Guyer 1995), how political subjectivity is constructed by stateless Burundian refugees living in a Tanzanian camp (Malkki 1995), or how economic production and distribution actually takes place in 'the real economy' of Zaire (now the Congo (MacGaffey 1991)" as cited by Ferguson (1999, 15) at the outset of his ethnography about the crises of prolonged economic decline in the Zambian Copperbelt—these are all examples of recent work that bear on the contemporary moment in Africa, and they are all dialogical.*

*The risk in writing a dialogical ethnography, as Graeber wryly notes in the preface to his ethnography on the legacy of slave descent in the Malagasy highlands (2007), may be in succumbing to what he calls "the imperatives of academic production" and writing dominantly "in dialogue with other scholars in the discipline" and so doing "a kind of violence to the experience" of fieldwork. This is reminiscent of what Davis has referred to as the "capacious balance between abstract and concrete" (2000, 25) in her extraordinary*

*monograph on Tabwa healing. There, she reports being "struck" by the particular challenge of doing ethnography, "by the respect in which events of record, biographical facts, memoirs, practices and imaginary spaces are put together in a sort of heteroglossia of the documentarist's art—an art of relocation" (2000, 23–25). Of course, such hesitations are not new. Evans-Pritchard (1937) noted that "a certain degree of abstraction is of course required, otherwise we would get nowhere, but... I find the usual account of field-research so boring as often to be unreadable—kinship systems, political systems, every sort of system, structure and function, but little flesh and blood. One seldom gets the impression that the anthropologist felt at one with the people about whom he writes" (254). At the time of his writing this, Evans-Pritchard was trying to carve a niche between the exhaustive, encyclopedic chronicling of field experience introduced by Malinowski, and the cold, calculated structuralism of Radcliffe-Brown. In so doing, he broke ground on a heuristic that continues to undergird—to some extent—all good contemporary ethnography.*

Years later, this assessment would return to you, resonant. The illusion of false coherence, the past irrevocably shattered, the challenge of moving beyond structural models, the hope and promise in the new, the desire to illuminate certain transformations, the risk of a radical (almost literal) dialogical ethnography (one which is principally conducted within a self, in full view of others, in the hope of staking out some kind of mutual transformation, generating some kind of durability in the face of the world), which of course, maybe the only way to write possession in a manner that does not do violence to the experience, yet aims to capture and retransmit the freedom and longing inherent in the violence and rupture of heteroglossia of the documentarist's art—the art of relocation. And in this instantiation, you find yourself walking up the long road connecting the M5 to the mental hospital, ready to return, at last.

You remember the first time you arrived at this place.

Fresh off your second journey, buoyed by Arnie's support and faith, you had returned to Malawi alone as an independent scholar, as a documentary filmmaker, as a "returned" Peace Corps Volunteer. At the time, massive changes were happening at the mental hospital, Dr. Xavier Kaunda had arrived, Malawi's first and only psychotherapist; and we working hard toward moving the institution away from the old centralized model of warehousing the mad toward

the new one based on decentralization and community medicine. It was an exciting time. And you were lucky that Xavier was willing to invite you on board.

You met at Tasty Bites, of course. A big, sturdy man with an American football player's build, Xavier had a deep voice, sweet and sensitive eyes, and circumspect demeanor.

"I'm late for a meeting, shall we go?"

"Sure," you say, hoping into his car.

You pass through central Zomba, under the rows of blue-gums, and over the bridges covering streams trickling fresh water down off the plateau, swing around the central prison with its perfectly manicured lawn, and then turn right onto a dirt road just past the central hospital. Next, Xavier slowed the car and veered right as a wiry person wandered down the road.

"This is one of our patients here, you see," he said.

"I'm sorry…" you responded naively.

"We don't have the capacity or the security to successfully keep them inside the grounds. It is very easy for some of them to go in and out. We try, but it is very difficult to keep them inside. They will take their lunch and some will be hungry and go to the market and beg for food for more. But they will always come back before dinner. In a way, community medicine is already in place."

You remember thinking that instead of Goffman's "total institution," you had arrived at the "porous institution" – you were excited by the prospect of coining the term. (Evidence that a certain kind of madness was in display both inside and outside the cabin of the Corolla.)

What followed was a transformative 5 months in and around the hospital. You were made particularly welcome by the two gentlemen that ran the admissions office.

Default archivists, they had been lifelong civil servants and was little hope for advance or promotion. A difficult frustrating life in which they were default caregivers and kept busy not with bawo but by watching online content from pirated Nollywood and Hollywood DVDs on their malfunctioning computers. Their office would be the place you would go when things got too stressful in the hospital. The agreement was simple. As an independent documentary film-maker you would work with Xavier and the community nursing officer to produce a video about conditions affecting the transition to this new approach to medicine. There was a lot of downtime. You would spend most of it playing with the three children with developmental disabilities in the children's ward—victims of childhood cerebral malaria, and other preventable diseases. The community

nursing officer, Mrs. Eunice Chaheka, was your liaison. A strong Sena woman with impeccable posture and a glorious laugh and smile who had all but taken on the children in the children's ward as her own during her working hours, you often felt like you were simply another of her orphans. She believed deeply in medicine and in people, would bring gifts for patients, and could deescalate situations with appeals to patients eyes and slow careful words, rather than with force. She reminded you of Mrs. Botha. You were terribly lucky, again, to have her as your guide and advocate. But your associations with Xavier and Mrs. Chaheka positioned you politically on one side of critical rift developing between the new guard (Xavier and the community team), and the old guard (the chief nursing officer and institutionalists), who had long held control of the hospital (and its resources). You could feel the rift, and it made you feel insecure, and any work you did to try to appeal to both sides fell flat. To the old guard, you were an uninvited guest, a plant who could potentially report them to authorities. But you were assured, by more than one person, that so long as Xavier was in charge and had your back, that you would be fine and welcome. He was the big man, so to speak.

You returned to America and got caught up in years of transcription and translation for a certain video installation project that you had attempted to conduct "on the side" during your time at the hospital. But you also felt uncomfortable using the footage from the hospital without deeper and more careful contextualization. You explained to Xavier that you felt like you needed more time and training. That you wanted to return with the footage after more careful consideration. You attended an anthropology conference and had a conversation with a prominent scholar about the nature of your experience. You had no expectation to return to academic anthropology. You were thinking of an MFA in film/video, specializing in experimental ethnography. The prominent scholar was impressed by your knowledge, inquiry and experience, and encouraged you to apply to the California program. You did, on a whim, and forgot about it. Receiving a letter months later inviting you to return to the field. A difficult decision. You took it. The promise of redemption perhaps. You told Xavier that you would be returning with the footage in a few years as a doctoral candidate. He congratulated you, explaining that this was his intention also. Things were moving, albeit in circles.

You remembered all these things, all these trajectories, recursions, and intentions as you walk back toward the mental hospital to begin your fieldwork in

earnest. It has been difficult to get in touch with Mrs. Chaheka and Xavier, but this can be normal. You had faith things would work out. You arrive at the gates of the hospital and you are permitted entry. You don't recognize the guards. They probably presume you are another one of the European volunteers on placement. You cross the grounds along the old path, tracing old footsteps. The new wing has been built. A sign indicates by which local contractors and with which international funding sources. You knock on the admission door and your two old friends joyfully cry out your name, giving you grief for not being in touch. You apologize, offer them some small gifts, and spend some time narrating the past few years. They congratulate you on your admission into a doctoral program. And pray that things will work out for you. You are most welcome, they declare. How is everyone, you ask. They are fine. Two of the children from the children's ward have passed away. But the other one, the one they remember was your favorite, is still alive, and has been shifted to Male Ward B.

"How is Mrs. Chaheka?" you ask.

"Have you been in touch with her?" one asks.

"I have been trying to reach her but I have been failing."

"She is not here. She is in South Africa getting treatment."

"Oh no, for what?"

"She was diagnosed with cancer. She has been fighting it very hard. But it is has been a challenge. We are all pulling for her."

"Oh no, I will go visit the family soon."

"Yes, they will appreciate that. The youngest son is now grown and is at University."

"Sungeni! Wonderful!"

"Yes, it is a real achievement – he will be happy to see you again."

This was difficult. You felt terrible. Blamed yourself for not reaching out sooner and better. For not sending money. Surely you could have helped somehow.

"Have you seen Xavier?"

"I hope to see him now."

"That is good he is in today, and that is rare."

"Why?" you ask.

"Ah, Mr.Price, things are really changing here. A lot is going on, and Xavier is coming and going from here to the U.K. very often."

"Oh yes, he said he was working on his PhD…."

"He is, but when he is gone the hospital is left in the hands of the old crew,

and with Mrs. Chaheka gone, you know what that means…"

"Yes, I suppose there is difficulty."

"Just talk with Xavier, things will be fine."

"Thank you."

You make your way across the grounds and climb the new grand concrete spiral staircase in the soon to be finished administration block and wait outside the office, having checked in with his secretary. You scribble in your field notebook, but only to keep busy. You are nervous. With Xavier gone and Mrs. Chaheka sick, you have will have to start fresh, and if the old guard are in control, there is every chance they will block you.

It is your turn. You are invited in. Xavier is behind his big desk with books upon books surrounding him. A cup of tea. Two computers. Two cell phones. Reams of paper and multiple white binders. He looks over-extended but is inviting nevertheless. The conversation is brief, interrupted by multiple phone calls and multiple hospital staff coming and going looking for various authorizations and permissions. You feel like a distraction. The field site is not the same under different circumstances. He seems confused by your return. Explains that things have changed, and that I will need to be approved by the Management Team. He suggests acting quickly. He will be leaving for the UK to complete his own studies but he will keep in touch via email. Send him an email and a formal application for research addressed to the Management Team. He'll be in touch. That is all the time for now. You thank him, leave, and walk slowly back to town, thinking about the emails you will write at Tasty Bites for the remainder of the day. It takes you two days to submit everything you think you need. You send your Fulbright application and your PhD proposal and then craft a Q&A style prospectus. You are not sure what they are looking for and you are hoping this is it. You hit send and wait, catch up on some reading, work on your language skills, email friends, read novels, wander. Once the management team approves your application you can move to getting further permissions from the ministry via the College of Medicine, but this must come first. Your document reads:

*Zomba Mental Hospital Research Committee c/o Dr. Xavier Kaunda Zomba Mental Hospital Zomba, Malawi*

***RE: SUMMARY LETTER REGARDING PROPOSAL TO CONDUCT ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH AT ZOMBA MENTAL HOSPITAL***

*Dear Dr. Kaunda:*
*Thank you for meeting with me last week, and for accepting my proposal to conduct ethnographic research at Zomba Mental Hospital. I hope you will pass it along to the research committee for review.*

*As per your suggestion, please accept this short overview of my proposed project, which I hope you can also pass along to the members of the research committee to aid in their evaluation of my proposal.*

*The purpose of this letter is to offer an easy-to-read overview of my plans, along with an assessment of the impact of the project and the manner in which I hope to work alongside members of staff.*
*I have structured this overview using a Q&A format.*

What do you hope to do at Zomba Mental Hospital?
*I am proposing to conduct ethnographic research at Zomba Mental Hospital in order to produce knowledge about the real challenges concerning mental health care delivery in Malawi. Ethnographic research is conducted mainly by social and cultural anthropologists. Its principal methods are participant-observation and open-ended interviews. Typically, an anthropologist will immerse himself in a social setting for an extended period of time and participate in the lives of people there—observing what they do, listening to their concerns and asking questions as they arise. This research method is meant to evoke the complexities and ambiguities of everyday life in order to provide a rich picture of how things actually work in certain situations—to suss out the complex patterns that constitute normal, taken-for-granted ways of thinking and doing things (or what some people call 'culture'). In this regard, it often tells a more complex story about how the world works in comparison to more "scientific" approaches which tend to be more quantitative and reductive. It may be useful to think of the anthropologist as an historian of the present—someone who is trying to tell a detailed and complicated story about a particular place at a particular time, and then to relate aspects of that story to particular theoretical concerns. For a more*

*detailed account of the issues and questions I am interested in (along with the theoretical framework I plan to employ) please see my full-length research proposal.*

Why do you want to conduct this research?
*I am currently a PhD candidate in sociocultural anthropology. In order to complete my degree, I must submit a doctoral dissertation—a detailed study regarding a particular problem. I have proposed this project for several reasons: Anthropologists typically do research in a foreign country. The foreign country I have spent the most amount of time in is Malawi. I first came to Malawi in 1999 as a Peace Corps Volunteer. I spent almost 3 years in Mzimba teaching English at a CDSS, coaching football and managing HIV/AIDS outreach work. I next returned to Malawi in 2007 and spent 5 months in Zomba. Some of my time was spent at Zomba Mental Hospital doing preliminary research for this project. I returned to Malawi in 2009 for two months of Chichewa language training at the Centre for Language Study at the University of Malawi. I have now returned for my fourth extended stay in Malawi as a US Fulbright Fellow. I will be here for 10 months on this fellowship. In short, it makes sense for me to do my doctoral research in Malawi because I have a strong relationship with things here. I have chosen to do a project at Zomba Mental Hospital because it is the hub of mental health care delivery in Malawi. Very little knowledge has been produced about contemporary mental hospitals in Sub-Saharan Africa. For this reason, an early advisor of mine had suggested it would be an important subject. My father suffers from clinical depression and there is a history of mental illness in my family, and so, personally, it was a subject that resonated with me, and so I spent several years doing background research in the form of comprehensive literature reviews on the subject. I now feel prepared to begin my study.*

Will this project benefit members of staff and/or the hospital?
*I believe it will. As part of my research, I plan to collaborate with members of staff to write a series of grant proposals to bring new projects and funding to the hospital. I also hope, upon my return to the United States, to facilitate partnerships between Zomba Mental*

*Hospital and universities and hospitals there. Ideally, this will allow for infrastructural growth and fresh opportunities for members of staff.*

What does your presence at the hospital mean for members of staff on an everyday basis?
*Probably very little. I want my presence to be as unobtrusive as possible. I plan to come to the hospital on most days for the next six months to one year and spend time with members of staff as they do their job. In ethnographic research, it is common to identify a handful of key collaborators (sometime referred to as 'consultants'). I hope to identify, with the assistance and blessing of management, a handful of key members of staff whom I can build a solid relationship with and spend much of my time with. I will also, upon arrival, introduce myself to members of staff and offer people informed consent forms which would allow me to observe people as they work and perhaps ask some questions now and again. If certain members of staff are not interested in participating in my project, that is absolutely fine.*
*What will you produce when this is all over? My main aim is to write a doctoral dissertation in anthropology about mental illness in Malawi from the point of view of the mental hospital. Typically, dissertations take 1-4 years to write, and they often have a small readership indeed. The best dissertations are published as academic books, which again have a very small readership. Sometimes chapters can be converted into articles for academic journals. This is my professional goal and obligation. But I also hope to produce funding (via grants) and facilitate important institutional connections, as well.*

*AN IMPORTANT NOTE: I am very well aware that members of staff at ZMH have sometimes felt misrepresented by outsiders. As some members of staff already know, I spent about 5 months at ZMH in 2007 doing preliminary research as well as documentary video. I have done nothing with that research and footage and would not do so without the express consent of management at the hospital for this very reason. I have spent more than 4 years in Malawi on 4 separate trips and I am fairly familiar with how things work here and I do not want to compromise my relationship with collaborators. I will share*

*my impressions and observations with members of staff on a daily basis and circulate drafts of anything I attempt to publish before sending it out. This is my way of simply saying that I believe I can be trusted, and that I am aware that my presence is reliant upon the trust that members of staff offer.*

*I hope this short statement helps. I am now in Zomba and will be eagerly awaiting news from the Research Committee. I am happy and free to meet with anyone prior to their evaluations.*

*Sincerely yours*

Weeks pass. You are teaching a course at the University of Malawi as part of your Fulbright, and that takes up some time. You imagine a film on urban farming as a side project. But no word from the mental hospital. You visit the hospital twice a week. You are told that the Management Team has failed to meet. Weeks pass. Finally, you receive word of when and where the next meeting will be. You arrive, are invited in. Questions are asked. There seems to be great skepticism regarding the usefulness of ethnography. One member points out a European doctor who had volunteered at the hospital and blogged about rats in the wards and how it had been an embarrassment and a violation. You explain that you had been here before and had clearly not done anything of the sort, that you are here to offer a compelling account and analysis that might deliver more insight into the future. A member notes that you are not bringing any funding with you. The head of the committee suggests there is little you can offer, but that they will deliberate and get back in touch with you. Weeks pass, and then, an email from the committee, rejecting your proposal. You visit the hospital the next day and the acting head of the hospital provides you with a document explaining the committee's rejection.

Xavier is in the UK. He seems disappointed, but unsurprised. He encourages you to write the committee asking for a reevaluation, and says he'll be back in a month to advocate for you on the ground. He is being supportive, but you recognize he has other things on his plate. You promptly write to the committee asking them to reevaluate your proposal, offering a rather entitled and passive-aggressive point-by-point rebuke to their rejection email which may have been cathartic but is probably by no means useful:

*Note: The following document is a transcribed facsimile of the memo I received from E.S. Banda in a meeting in her office. (I have transcribed the document because I was not offered an electronic copy.) My comments are embedded in the document and written in italics. (When errors occur in the original memo I have left them, along with the customary [sic] mark.)*

*In attendance at that meeting on 14 December were two other members of the Management Team. In that meeting, the Chair invited me to submit detailed responses to the memo for reconsideration by the Management Team and other interested parties – such as Ministry of Health officials.*

*It is my hope that the Management Team will reconsider my proposal not only in light of my comments, but also with regards to the documentation the committee did not consider upon first evaluation (apparently, a key document was not forwarded to the Management Team for consideration).*

**Zomba Mental Hospitals [sic] management's response to Jason J Price's Ethnography of Mental Health Care Delivery in Malawi based at Zomba Mental Hospital**

Introduction

The above research protocol was thoroughly discussed by the research committee of Zomba Mental Hospital and the Management team of the hospital as well. The research protocol is very detailed and about 33 pages.

General comment

Management of Zomba Mental Hospital feels that the researcher should have discussed his concept with management of the hospital before developing it into a full proposal. It does not make sense for the researcher to develop a full research protocol before agreeing in principal with the institution where the research project is going to be conducted that the project is in line with the hospital's research needs and program. As will be seen below, the

project does fall as part as part [sic?] of the hospital's research needs and program for a number of reasons including that similar types of projects have been done before and management does not feel this project will bring up any substantial new information.

*The first line is misleading. I discussed my concept with management of the hospital before submission for review. I submitted the proposal to Dr. Kaunda. He offered me suggestions and told me that he would be submitting the proposal to the Zomba Mental Hospital Research Committee on my behalf. If he had instructed me to contact the Management Team next, I would have done so, naturally. Dr. Kaunda encouraged me to write a summary statement of my research program in order to highlight the applied/practical benefits of my research project. I wrote this statement and circulated it amongst members of the Research Committee who were in attendance at the Research Meeting which Mr. Innocent Mkandawire invited me to participate in in November. Unfortunately, that summary letter does not appear to have been forwarded to the Management Team for consideration. The Management Team acknowledges that my project "does fall as part of the hospital's research needs and program" but I believe this is might be a typing mistake considering the rejection of the proposal which follows. If it is not a simple typing error (the omission of 'not' prior to 'does'), the general comment is inconsistent with the enumerated sections which follow, and the general decision which is implied – please note, the committee never in their memo offers a firm up or down answer to my proposal.*

Unless management can offer evidence that ethnographic research has been conducted at the hospital in the past with an eye towards making novel connections across various domains of service delivery with an eye towards building bridges to new institutional partners both domestically and internationally, it is not quite true that (a) 'similar types of projects have been done before,' and (b) the project will not bring up 'substantial new information'. I beg the Management Team to interrogate this line of argumentation.

Specific issues arising form [sic] the protocol

1. Management feels that the research project does not have any benefits for the hospital. Management feels that the project cannot come up with useful new information on service delivery at the hospital of which management is not aware of. In terms of problems faced by the hospital which the research says his project will help to bring this to the attention of the Ministry and other stakeholders, management is very much aware of the problems faced by the hospital and so far, different steps are being taken to address problems like infrastructure, shortage of staff [sic] etc. It does not really see what new information the project will bring and the impact this new information will bring. In summary management feels that the project which would involve the hospital and its staff a lot has no really [sic] benefits to the hospital and the major beneficiary of the projects [sic] will be the researchers themselves.

*My research project contains an applied/practical element which was outlined in my summary letter – submitted to Dr. Kaunda and reviewed by the Research Committee in October. The Management Team does not seem to have been forwarded that letter. Regrettably, I ascertained from my meeting with representatives from the Management Team that at least two members of the Management Team seem unwilling to even consider it as part of the research proposal.*

2. One of the problems which Zomba Mental Hospital faces is severe shortage of staff and management feels that having a researcher at the hospital for one year following up what staff are doing and asking them questions while they are working, will in itself cause unnecessary additional stress on staff members while they are performing their duties.

*I make it very clear in my proposal that committing time to working with me is at the should not be a priority. In fact, this is one of the justifications for long-term study.*

3. Zomba Mental Hospital has had similar projects done at the hospital although not done as a research project and not of the magnitude being proposed by the researchers. An example of this is a psychiatrist from North-western [sic] University in the United States of America whom management granted permission last year to observe service delivery at the hospital for one week. In 2006, a management trainee from the U.K. spent six months at the hospital with the aim of assisting the hospital to come up with a five year work plan. The process mainly involved assessing service delivery in terms of its strengths and challenges and this involved observations and interviews. In this case, the program/exercise benefited the hospital a lot because ta the end of the six months, we came up with a five year draft work plan to help us maintain the strengths which were observed and address the challenges which the hospital was meeting. Management does not feel that repeating the same exercise again will bring any new information.

*The argument that similar projects have been done at Zomba Mental Hospital is specious. Management cites two projects – one in psychiatry, another in social work. These are very different disciplines from social and cultural anthropology, with very different premises, agendas and research methods. This research project would not at all similar. Management itself acknowledges a great difference in magnitude (time) and subject position (non-medical personnel) but then would like to consider my project "similar" to these other projects. This is inconsistent as this does not represent "repeating the same exercise". Ultimately, each new research program in the social sciences will ALWAYS bring new information – because of the nature of social research itself.*

4. Despite the fact that the hospital has had similar projects done before, the experience of management on projects like these is that the information gathered can be misrepresented and some people have abused the trust of the management team of Zomba mental hospital in granting them permission to observe service delivery at the hospital.

*This is an important concern which I dealt with in my letter and proposal. In 2007, I spent 5 months in Zomba Mental Hospital doing preliminary research under the guidance of Dr. Kaunda and yet I have not misrepresented the hospital in the nearly 5 years since. I feel as if that fact should be considered. Also, if Management is concerned about issues of trust and misrepresentation, I have suggested that I have no problem entering into formal agreements regarding representation in my research design – perhaps this was the problem with the cases which Management refers to but fails to cite? Moreover, specific issue #4 does not appear "specific" at all. It makes no reference to my research proposal or my own history with Zomba Mental Hospital.*

5. Management also felt that the ethical considerations of the project are also complicated. Management feels the researchers cannot observe staff working without informed consent from both staff members and patients. Although the researchers say that they will respect the decisions made by both staff and patients who refuse to give informed consent, the logistics of the issues around informed consent are complicated in a number of ways. Majority of our patients do not have the capacity to give informed consent. Most activities in relation to service delivery was done in groups like ward rounds, occupational therapy etc [sic] and this creates a problem when some members of the group have given informed consent while others have not. The other ethical consideration was that to have a non-medical person observing how care is being delivered with him not involved in the delivery of care, then the project should have substantial benefits to the patients which in this case management felt there were not there since management feels it is very much aware of the strengths and constraints of service delivery at the hospital. The project will be done purely for benefits of satisfying the PhD program.

*Similar to specific issue #4, specific issue #5 makes no direct reference to my research proposal. Also, management does not acknowledge that I have covered the issue of informed consent in my proposal.*

*Lastly, the assertion of regarding the "pure" motives of the researcher is unfair, offensive and ungrounded.*

[signed] E.S. Banda (Mrs) For: MANAGEMENT

*At no time was I offered a full list of the Management Team; nor was the memo officially stamped or written on ZMH letterhead.*

This was a desperate plea which may only be useful now as evidence of the absurdity and futility of certain ethnographic endeavors and/or the hubris of certain student wannabe ethnographers. Clearly, you had invested so very much time and effort and fantasy in this project, that it became impossible and untenable for anyone to tell you "No"—making it impossible for you to read the writing on the wall.

A senior scholar in town for a research trip sympathized with your situation and recommended you incorporate the letter into your study, that it was a useful document to think with. She also didn't see any problems for your moving forward with your project at different field sites.

"You should just take your project to the village level. I can share some of my researchers with you. They're excellent! Have all the connections you need. You can go into our villages and do some survey work and make the same arguments you had hoped to make there."

She probably was not so flippant and casual, but this is what you heard. You tried to explain that your project was not transferrable. That you had a vision of an ethnography about this particular place, the mental hospital. You stopped short of referencing *The House is Black*, aware that it would make you look like a madman in the eyes of this accomplished and well-published senior social scientist.

You would stick it out, you said, having convinced yourself that things would start moving—that they would have to.

But, of course they would not. More weeks past. Xavier failed to return to Malawi as planned. You continued to visit the hospital. Promises were made about the re-evaluation. Time passed. You taught your course at the University of Malawi, but time was slipping away and your funding was drying up—something would have to give.

Finally, one day, waiting outside the administration block at the hospital, a psychiatric intern, a recent graduate, who you admired and deeply respected, but who had always kept his distance from you, invited you into his office.

He was very careful about it, very ginger. It felt like a risk for him.

You were confused, concerned, felt like you had done something wrong.

"Mr. Price, did you know that I am doing my masters in South Africa?"

"No," you say, surprised.

"Yes, of course you don't. No one does. I am doing it on my vacation time. I fly to South. No one here knows, other than Dr. Kaunda."

"That is strange, why?" you say, perplexed, wondering if he was about to ask you for funding.

"Because if people here knew, they would block me."

"What?"

"You have been in Malawi before, yes? There is a lot of jealousy here, and the people here at the hospital. The old guard. They are very powerful. They are working hard to keep control of their power. They are very threatened, and with good reason. They are being pushed out, I think you know this."

"Yes. I do."

"So can you see what I am trying to say to you?"

"Not quite."

"You are never going to get your project approved here so long as Dr. Kaunda is away, and it will be some time before he finishes and returns. The committee simply will not approve your request. They see no benefit for them, and only risk. You have no chance. You can put this project on the shelf for now and return to it in future. But there is no point in waiting. You have to know this."

Memories of an elevator resurface. The loss of some projected redemption. The death of a fantasy. How does one respond in the face of an obstacle? What resources are available to him or her? You thank him, deeply and sincerely. And congratulate him on the masters, reassure him that you will not speak of it, and walk out of his office in something of a daze. You walk over to admissions and say goodbye to your two friends. They ask you if everything has been resolved. You say you think it might be. They congratulate you and say they look forward to seeing you. You wish Mrs. Chaheka was around. You'll soon be spending time with her at home as she convalesces. She will tell you to keep the faith for the future, but agree with the intern that the time was not right. You ring Chimomo in Chikangawa. It had been a few months since your return and you had not gone to

visit him up in the plantation. You tell him you are free and planning to visit. He says he is so very happy, that you are most welcome.

It is a two-day journey from Zomba to Chikangawa by public transport. You no longer take buses or mini-buses, feeling more comfortable hitch-hiking, a skill you mastered during Peace Corps, which has proven to work well for you in Malawi, but not in other nations in the region. The key is to get away from town and find an ample shoulder up on a hill, preferably on a long straightaway. This way people are down-shifting, get a long look at you, and there is space for them to pull over and offer you a lift. There are not many *azungu* who do this, so you capitalize on the novelty of it. It can take anywhere from 5 minutes to 5 hours, but is almost always just as fast as taking a bus, cheaper and safer. Usually an elite or some NGO worker will pick you, sometimes a tourist. The conversations are always interesting. You always imagined it would be a fine basis for an ethnography.

One lift to Lilongwe, an overnight with your Knoxville friend, and then two more lifts: one from Lilongwe to the Mzimba turnoff, another from the turnoff to Raiply guesthouse, where Nelson has agreed to meet you in a certain window.

Things were working out for Chimomo and his family, and you were looking forward to this visit. A chance to reflect and imagine a way forward. After returning to Chikangawa with his BSC in Forestry and being promoted to Manager he was faced with a similar decision to that of Jon Jere's. A British company had arrived interested in a long-term concession of the plantation in order to produce Citriodiol by "making and accelerating nature's own ageing in the Eucalyptus citriodoa leaf, resulting in a highly effective active ingredient that is supported by a robust data set, approved by leading international authorities for use in insect repellents, and available globally." The trick was that they really couldn't get the plantation off the ground without Chimomo. There was simply too much stalling and bureaucracy. So they made him an offer: quit your job at the Ministry and join our company as our plantation manager. Again, as with Jon Jere, and, we can presume, many others deciding between the semi-security of a public-sector job and the promises of privatization, this must have been a difficult choice. But he took the leap and things appeared to work out. They left their home in Chikangawa and moved into a brand-new, big house deep inside the plantation. Their children were offered money for top-of-the line boarding schools and Glory was offered a job tending to the plantation garden. Things were moving. You were proud, and felt a sense of pride in your part of their success.

It was a good stay. You told stories by the fire, hunted for *makoswe* with Philip in the dry fields, helped Lucia with her homework, chatted with Glory about your family in America, listened to Chimomo talk about the challenges of running the plantation. You managed to play a few rounds of chess, but you probably watched more free-to-air satellite television, laughing at the endless miracles being broadcast from Nigeria on Emmanuel TV. They encouraged you to open yourself up to the world and to seek other opportunities and to give up on the mental hospital for now.

"There are too many problems with government these days," Chimomo said. "It is not what is was like in Kamuzu's time. It is very frustrating."

Stay with the trouble, he seemed to be saying, but not for too long.

On the day before you were about to leave Lucia, who was home from boarding school awaiting the release of national examination results, pulled you aside, and said, gravely:

"Price, can I speak to you?"

You were worried—feared she was pregnant (or worse—positive).

"Sure, what's wrong. Are you alright?"

She began to cry and narrate the story: Chimomo had taken a second wife, the second wife was pregnant, he had begun diverting funds from Glory and the kids. He had changed, Lucia said. You were devastated. You had no idea. She said that that was the intention; that, considering all you had done for him, that you should not know. "What can I do?" you asked.

"Can you speak to him? You are the only one he might listen to."

"What about the church leaders?" you asked.

"They have all been here. He will not listen to them. He is a boss now."

Later in the day you spoke to Glory. Told that you knew. She was working in the garden. She smiled and said, "You know, Price, it's very difficult. I am very grateful for you and all of your help, but I often wish you had never assisted Mr. Chimomo. He has changed. Before we lived in a small house and it was difficult, but now we are here in this place, but things are more difficult somehow."

Later that evening. You asked to go for a drive with Nelson to a nearby guesthouse for a beer. On the way back, you asked him if you could stop and look at the stars. It was a cold night—typical Viphya—but unusually clear. You told him you knew about the second wife and expressed your concerns about the family and about sickness and health. It was a difficult conversation. You can't remember much of it. In many regards, you had drawn a line, having decided that it was no longer your place to intervene. You told Glory you spoke to him. She

thanked you for doing what you could.

Back in Zomba you tried to formulate a new research project. You had been making a film with one of your students about urban farming, you also had considered trying to extend your 24-hour video installation into some kind of an ethnography. There was a petrol crisis, and you were tapped into a network of young men who were doing well smuggling petrol in from Mozambique, but it was the kind of project that would require a lot of footwork, and you were firmly settled in Zomba, having rented a house from the university and committed to team teaching a course in documentary video with your wife who had also joined you from America. Your project would have to be local. But what?

A knock on the door.

"Yes," you say. "Come in."

It is Phil, one of your students, he is coming by to drop off a book he had borrowed from you. It is a bright Sunday morning. He is dressed in crisp white oxford buttoned at the neck and tucked in carefully to tidy black trousers with polished black shoes and black belt.

In the background, beyond the chirping of birds, the play of children, the clucking of chickens and the guzzle of the occasional diesel engine, you hear, as always:

"Holy Ghost... FIRE! Holy Ghost... BURNING!"

Along with the usual bass line, an electronic piano, some drums, a lead guitar…

"Holy Ghost... FIRE! Holy Ghost... BURNING!

BURNING... CONSUMING!

BURNING... CONSUMING!

Holy Ghost... FIRE! Holy Ghost... BURNING!"

So regular it had become, you barely noticed it.

"You look nice. Are you off to church?"

"Yes," Phil said, patting his Bible.

"Where do you pray?"

"Just here," he said motioning over his shoulder, beyond the hedge in front of you house.

"Oh this Pentecostal church here?"

"HOGEM yes."

"What?" you asked?

"HOGEM—it stands for The Holy Ghost and Evangelism Ministries, Inc.

Have you not been?"

"No, never. I'm ashamed to say. Please don't tell anyone that I have never been in a Pentecostal church—considering their popularity it is a terrible admission for someone saying they are an anthropologist!"

"You should come with me then. You are most welcome. I teach on Sundays in the youth ministry."

Nothing to lose, you grab your things, and join him.

The worship team had already begun. You take a place on a bench at the back beside a stack of speakers. The bass batters your chest. Parishioners materialize from the bright outside. Many carried Bibles and notepads. Some had dressed up, others had not. You were surprised how many women appeared to have come alone. By 9 a.m., the children had been ushered off to Sunday school, and most everyone had taken their seats. Golden drapes covered the walls. Light poured in from outside. Fluorescents shined from above. The stage up ahead was set with a burgundy carpet. The worship team were stationed to the left, amid a jumble of instruments and electronics. The pastors were stationed to the right, in a den behind a coffee table with a vase of plastic flowers perched on top. Between them, on a slightly vaulted platform, stood a shiny glass podium. Embossed on the podium was the church emblem: a blood red cross under a royal blue sky where a white dove emitted red-yellow rays of light onto a single white sheep with the acronym, HOGEM, in bold blue letters below.

You would learn later that The Holy Ghost and Evangelism Ministries Inc. had moved to this location about eight years ago. One reason they moved was because of noise complaints coming from the congested, high-density area where they used to operate. The shift was a step up. The more urbane environment yielded a more cosmopolitan congregation, and the proximity to the main road meant that pilgrims who got wind of the healing power of HOGEM's Senior Pastor, Allan Jiya, would have easier access when coming in search of miracles. Every charismatic church has its Man of God, and each Man of God is endowed with special gifts. Pastor Jiya's is that of deliverance—a form of spiritual healing akin to exorcism.

Pastor Jiya didn't appear straight away that day. Instead, a junior pastor in an oversized suit delivered the opening sermon. He preached in Chichewa while a tall professional woman with pitch perfect posture translated into English. This appeared to be important. Not only does it demonstrate a degree of cosmopolitan sophistication via reference to the globalized charismatic Christianity so popular on the free-to-air satellite television channels which

Malawians seem to watch with the same kind of commitment that Americans do cable news, but you would be told that it opens things up to a more international audience, as well.

After the sermon, the worship team broke into something resembling slow jazz or muzak, a large lace doily was laid out before the podium, and the ushers circulated brown paper envelopes throughout the congregation. It was time for the offerings.

This was the moment Pastor Jiya alighted. He called a group of people forward for the tithe. He asked them to form a line. Arms raised and envelopes in hand, they closed their eyes, prayed, and waited for his anointing. He set down his microphone, then set off down the line. He placed his right hand gently on the first supplicant's forehead. This triggered her soft collapse. She fell into the expectant arms of an attendant usher behind her. It was then that Pastor Jiya picked the brown envelope from her fingers. He did this, one-by-one, until the line was felled. The rest of the congregation were then encouraged to come forward. A line formed. It circled around the hall. People dropped their envelopes onto the doily as they passed the podium. Then they returned to their seats, where nobody sat down. The ushers raked in the envelopes. The band picked up their tempo. Hands were raised to Jesus. Murmurs of prayer grew louder. Pastor Jiya started pacing across the stage saying something about giving and receiving. Then, just before the sound reached a critical mass, Pastor Jiya intervened, rallying you to, “PRAY!! PRAY!! PRAY!!”

It was at that moment that the whole church began speaking in tongues.

A new experience for you. It felt, at least that first time, as if your consciousness was being lured—or even pulled—towards the collective unconsciousness of everyone in the room. It was eerie—slightly dangerous—but also warm, and somehow comforting.

You can't remember exactly when the deliverances began. It might have been just then. It's entirely possible. Sometimes glossolalia leads to rapture. The Holy Ghost sweeps in unannounced and starts chasing out demons. But it could also have been after Pastor Jiya's sermon. It probably doesn’t really matter.

What does matter, in this context, are the deliverances—for that is where you can begin to understand what is going on when you hear, “Holy Ghost... FIRE!”, the song which not only circumscribes our “ethical soundscape,” but which also offers the most salient clues as to what kind of “exercises in ethical self-discipline” (Hirschkind 2001: 623) might be enacted during the “visceral orientations” (2001: 640) regularly being generated at places like HOGEM.

For it is deliverances that are the central element of HOGEM's religious practice. They appear at the tail end of most services and can go on for hours.

A deliverance can be understood as the process wherein demonic spirits are cast out of human hosts by powerful men and women of God.

The practice often takes the form of an epic battle between good and evil, waged over the terrain of a single human body.

Beliefs associated with deliverance are ultimately etiological—behind every problem, behind every sickness or disease, behind every bad behavior or abnormality, behind all misfortune and loss... a demon is there.

Demons, you would come to learn, are spiritual emissaries of Satan whose main aim is to inhibit human beings from fulfilling their potential as forms of life created in the image of God. They come in many forms—there are animal demons such as snakes and crocodiles, behavioral demons like the evil demons of lesbianism or alcoholism, and humanoid demons such as spiritual husbands and spiritual wives. Demons infiltrate persons, often at night, particularly when people are engaging in bad behavior, though this is by no means a prerequisite for being possessed. Everyone is susceptible to evil spirits, to some degree, at all times, you would be told. The only way to ensure good health and good fortune, then, is to be delivered regularly after having received Jesus Christ as your Lord and personal savior (in others words, to become born-again).

Deliverances are conducted by spiritually mature people. This usually refers to a Man of God or his chosen cognates. At HOGEM, Pastor Jiya conducts most of the deliverances; though his junior pastors play important roles in handling less troublesome deliverances, and preparing serious cases for him to finish off. The mainstream churches in Malawi do not engage in this practice, and not all Pentecostal churches do either. This makes HOGEM rather unique, specializing in a popular form of spiritual healing that many Malawians are curious about—due, in large part, to the wildly popular television productions of the Nigerian prophet, TB Joshua, who does similar work.

Music is an essential element for deliverances at HOGEM. During a typical service, such as the one I first visited, the worship team will collaborate with pastors and congregants to create a sonic environment that mitigates shifts into the altered states of consciousness necessary for deliverances to happen. This is impossible to describe adequately in words. What you have to imagine is being kind of entrapped on all sides by something like a shifting series of thick webs of song and speech. The experience transmutes time and space into something less

real—what the philosopher John L. Austin (1962) might consider a “felicity condition” for deliverance.

Once the scene—or, rather, the sensorium—is set, the work can begin.

Pastor Jiya circles the room. The congregation has been speaking in tongues for nearly a minute. The air is thick with utterances, sweat, expectation. He closes in on one particular woman. He stands before her, cocks his head, and stares deep into her closed eyes. Her prayers pick up. She shuffles backwards. An usher flies in, pulling the chair out from behind her. The sound of the screech from the plastic legs being dragged along the concrete floor hangs in the air for a moment, over the beat and chordal glossolalia of the room. Another usher fills the space left by the chair. She waits for the fall, arms outstretched. Pastor Jiya puckers his lips. He blows cool air on her face. This heats the woman up even more. Then—“In the MIGHTY Name of Jesus!!!”—he releases his grip on her head as she falls like a brick towards the floor where she is caught by the usher before hitting the ground. Pastor Jiya walks away. He is the hunter, and there are more demons to be had. The body of the woman is lifted off the ground by the ushers and carried through a thicket of bodies and chairs to the stage where she is set on the burgundy carpet to moan and roll and wait. Pastor Jiya marches on. He shoots the Holy Ghost into a series of supplicants – “BANG BANG BANG BANG BANG” – some fall, others don't. Green plastic chairs slide here and there. Ushers run all around, trying to anticipate where the action will be next. Sweat pours down Pastor Jiya's shiny globe. He looks around, heaving. 'Has everyone that needs to be prayed for been prayed for?  Yes.' He then turns back to the stage. Several bodies are there. The junior pastors have been working on them – “OUT! OUT! GET OUT!” – patting and slapping and prodding the spirits to the surface. One woman spews saliva onto the newsprint an usher wearing white latex gloves laid out before her. Another woman has had the lower half of her body covered by a baby-blue sheet. Pastor Jiya hands his microphone to an usher nearby. He removes his jacket. He loosens his tie. He unbuttons the top of his pressed pink shirt. He rolls up his sleeves. His cufflinks shine. He demands the microphone back. Then points to the woman he first laid out, and signals the team to bring her. The body is rushed to the spot. “In the MIGHTY Name of Jesus, GET OUT!!!” The words are a bolt of electricity down the woman's spine. But nothing really happens. A pause follows, which the music fills. Down on one knee, Pastor Jiya gets a good grip on her hair, pulls back her head, and peers deep into her eyes. “WHO ARE YOU? AND WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO THIS GIRL?” Still nothing. The demons are being evasive, uncooperative. They are hiding. Pastor Jiya gestures to the band to stop. At last,

the music cuts out. The silence, after so many minutes of irrepressible noise, is powerful. “WHO ARE YOU? WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO THIS GIRL?” He pulls back on the woman's hair again, she cries out, another pause follows. “LOSE HER! LOSE HER NOW!” He throws the woman to the ground. She covers up. He rushes over – “FIRE FIRE FIRE... FIRE ALL OVER YOUR BODY” – and pokes her along the abdomen. She braces herself and cries out, though slightly. The demons are there, but they are refusing to speak. This is a serious matter. If the demons do not speak, they cannot be known. If they cannot be known, then they cannot be named. If they cannot be named, then Pastor Jiaya can claim no power over them. And if he can claim no power over them, then the woman will not be delivered. And if the woman is not delivered, she will never be set free. Pastor Jiya needs help bringing the demons to the surface.

“HOLY GHOST... FIRE!” he suddenly screams, pointing directly to the band, who break out immediately into HOGEM's signature song:

Holy Ghost... FIRE! Holy Ghost... BURNING!
Holy Ghost... FIRE! Holy Ghost... BURNING!
BURNING... CONSUMING!
BURNING... CONSUMING!
Holy Ghost... FIRE! Holy Ghost... BURNING!
Holy Ghost... FIRE! Holy Ghost... BURNING!
FIRE BURNING FIRE BURNING FIRE BURNING FIRE BURNING...

The entire congregation, many of whom have formed a circle around the woman, singalong. As they sing, they raise their hands at the hips and bat them down again with every rhythmic mention of the words, “fire” and “burning”. It is an act of invocation. They are calling upon the Holy Ghost to attend to this woman, to come to HOGEM and chase out the evil demons stowed away inside her. The woman goes into a frenzy, as if being spiritually immolated from the inside out. She rolls along the ground, leaps to her feet, then runs about in a haze. Pastor Jiya is reinvigorated. He licks his lips, rolls up his sleeves. The contest takes on the feel of a boxing match, one in which the contender is on the ropes. He slips in behind her, gets ahold of her hair, whips her around in a circle, and then flings her towards the congregation. She is caught by the crowd, and laid onto the ground. She then shakes off the spiritual blow, gets up, and keeps fighting. All the while, people chanting:

Holy Ghost... FIRE! Holy Ghost... BURNING!
Holy Ghost... FIRE! Holy Ghost... BURNING!

This is enthralling the first time; but like anything else, it can become mundane pretty quickly.

You realize there must be hundreds of deliverances at HOGEM every week, and they all conform to the same general pattern.

This is why, in the midst of a heated deliverance, with a young woman lying on the ground as anointing oil is rubbed all over her womb, with demons screaming through her, “No! No! I will never leave her!”, you might look towards the band only to find one of the musicians lost in a daydream—bored—waiting for the service to end. It is all, to some degree, routinized.

The cat and mouse game between pastor and possessed person can go on for a while. Slowly but surely the demons will surface and speak—offering clues to their identities, or the nature of their nefarious work—before diving down again into the depths of a person. This is when Pastor Jiya will call upon the congregation, through sound, to force them back up again.

This is the function of “Holy Ghost... FIRE!” This is what you had been hearing all those weeks—a collective effort by an assembly of believers to assist a Pentecostal pastor in the practice of delivering malicious spirits from possessed people via the productive capacities of sound.

Sounds which impel the Holy Ghost to intervene in life and death battles between evil spirits and men and women of God.

Battles which are not abstractions, but which consistently unearth particular struggles suffered by actual people who are genuinely laboring to construct meaningful lives in the real world.

This is why questions like, “WHO ARE YOU?” and “WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO HER?”, should not be understood as absurd, but achingly relevant.

Typical answers such as, “I am her spiritual husband,” and “I am trying to destroy her life” (either by preventing her from finishing school, or preventing her from getting married, or preventing her from having a child, or preventing her from getting a job, etc.) bring to light serious worldly afflictions, no matter that they are couched in a spiritual idiom.

This is also why the commands commonly issued by pastors in the heat of deliverance – “OUT!!”, “GET OUT!!” and “LOSE HER!” – carry with them such import and immediacy.

Most everyone who comes for deliverance is looking to be liberated from some kind of terrible burden.

This is why, at the end of every deliverance, Pastor Jiya picks the person off the floor, stands her up straight, looks her dead in the eye, and says... “You are

free." You are free because you have addressed the demons that are behind your problems. You may now proceed on a path of moral action which will enable you to actualize yourself, which has been made in the image of God, and so, is designed for greatness.

This transformation does not happen in a sensorial vacuum. Reason alone is not enough. People must feel in order to believe. Nearly every major Christian thinker since Augustine have acknowledged as much (Hirschkind 2001: 639).

The morning services are over. Phil comes to the back of the hall to reconnect with you. He is a bit sweaty, but light, and good. He asks if you have enjoyed yourself. You thank him and say you have.

"Would you like to meet the pastor? I think he would like to meet you..."

"Sure. It would be a pleasure," you say.

You wait your turn while people come and go through his office door. People greet you. You greet them in return.

HOGEM rents the hall from the now nearly defunct Malawi Congress Party which is, itself, about to be reborn. The other tenant in the hall is a security agency which employs mostly older men in part because there is a belief that they have access to spiritual powers of protection.

The door opens and you are ushered in and invited to sit down on a plush chair. Pastor Jiya is glistening with sweat. A bright white towel around his neck. He seems invigorated by your presence. There is a tall, measured women sitting by his side, she smiles and nods at you.

"Mr. Price! Welcome!"

"It is a pleasure, Pastor Jiya—truly."

"Phil has told us a little about you. You are his teacher at Chancellor College…"

"Yes, but I am learning as much from him, to be honest."

"Humility is an important trait Mr. Price. Very good!"

"I understand you have been having some problems at the mental hospital."

You are surprised.

"I told him a bit about your situation." Phil says meekly.

"Yes, indeed," and for the next five to ten to fifteen minutes you tell him your story. Both he and the woman beside him, whom you would come to learn was the chair of the church committee who held a master's degree from a prestigious university in America and who directed an NGO in town devoted to

children, listened attentively. More attentively, perhaps, then you have been listened to in some time. They maintained eye contact. Made small, subtle noises and gestures at key points in your story which indicated that they were right there with you—pulling for you. It was attractive to feel heard. And when you closed with the sentence, "I don't know, it might not work out…" You were stunned by the feeling of relief and hope that swelled up inside of you the moment Jiya said, "No!" and the manner in which the committee chair smiled and shook her head in opposition to the foreclosure you were foretelling.

"Mr. Price…. You have come here a long distance. Not one time, but many times. You have come here to Malawi and you have given people so much. And you have received so much. But your story will not end this way. You will complete your Ph.D. You will come here and study mental illness here in our church. You will see that we cure more people of mental illness here then they do at the hospital. You will see."

"Amen," said the woman.

Phil smiled, looking the way a parent does when their child receives an unexpected present.

"Whatever demon of anthropology that has been inside of you will be released here so you can finally do your study. You are free. This is your breakthrough."

## Epilogue

In *Ethnographic Sorcery*, Harry West writes: "The question remains, is it truly possible for the anthropologist—or anyone else for that matter—to conceive of his or her view of the world as fundamentally contestable?" (2007: 82)

Perhaps ethnography can only begin once the anthropologist accepts that the answer is yes; perhaps it is only then that the ethnographer can even begin to truly deliver.

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