theories and methodologies

Transposing Time and Space: Stuck in Mobility

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Obiara, pɛ sɛ ɔtu kwan ("Everybody wants to travel")
—Reggie Rockstone[1]

IF YOU HAVE TO EXPLAIN A PROVERB, IT IS TOO ESOTERIC FOR POPULAR USE; BUT IF IT IS TOO MUNDANE AND OBVIOUS, IT WILL NOT CIRCULATE or gain notoriety. It should be witty and rhythmic but obscure; it should attract new meanings and move among various contexts and genres, taken up by listeners who recirculate it in new media to new audiences. Effective proverbs use indirection as a performance strategy, provoking new interpretations and lubricating social circulation across disparate spaces (Yankah).

Proverbial speech and proverb-like social performances are particularly significant to public life in Accra, the capital city of Ghana, as they are in many parts of West Africa. In *Oxford Street, Accra: City Life and the Itineraries of Transnationalism*, Ato Quayson reads Oxford Street as a proverb-like multivocal sign that draws its dwellers into contemporary Accra while compelling them to engage in its past lives and future potentials. His book pushes and pulls its readers; it provokes and winks at its characters and audiences as it reveals multiple layers of seemingly simple enactments of daily urban life. It implies through juxtaposition. Quayson's text is built on a series of transpositions of temporal and spatial logics that emerge from his methodological blending of close reading and historical ethnography. I want to explore the theoretical space this book opens up as it examines the logic of circulation, in which interplays between time and space produce and are produced by dense multivocal signs. Proverbial speech and proverb-like expressions provide detachable pieces of discourse that extend performances into time and across social space, linking multiple registers and referential logics as they travel. In the process they generate the contexts from which they purportedly emerge. That is to say, a proverb or a proverb-like sign—whether it is a street, slogan, dance move, or even manner of forgetting—condenses an emotional-sensory experience that develops through a historical

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dynamic, fixing it spatially through performance so it can migrate across social realms and genres. In approaching Accra as a kind of proverb, Quayson explores the movement between spatial and temporal logics. He begins in the present, moves backward and then forward, and rapidly traverses social geographies to link seemingly disparate practices. I explicate his approach in the realm of popular culture, describing a comedic storyteller in Accra who does something similar to what Quayson does in transposing time and space.

Quayson begins and ends on Oxford Street, a stretch of vibrant commercial road in the Osu neighborhood that has been a center for shopping, dining, style, and nightlife in Accra since Ghana's return to democratic rule in the early 1990s. Quayson shows how Oxford Street's cultural and commercial ascent is built on a centuries-old history of transnational trade, mobility, and multiracial and multicultural community in Osu and how Accra's built environment has been shaped by the long-term development of a coastal trading economy. Quayson argues that the area of Osu developed around the Danish settlement at Christianborg Castle, starting in the seventeenth century. Over several centuries of trade in slaves, as well as in gold, guns, palm oil, and other commodities, a vibrant coastal society emerged as a space of mediation made up of various European, African, and mixed populations. Quayson is particularly concerned with the development of an elite class of Afro-Europeans with trading power and some degree of autonomy. Competition among European powers and inland and coastal polities and trade networks meant that hybrid spaces of trade and interaction allowed Afro-Europeans to become powerful intermediaries in the midst of the violence of the slave trade on the coast, though their historical significance is in many ways erased from the historical record. Indeed, popular and official stories about Accra transform its complex disparate influences into a semblance of a coherent totality caught amid impossible dichotomies—traditional and modern, rural and urban, African and European.

Oxford Street is a microcosm of Accra's social order, incorporating multiple, contradictory registers, signs, and bodies into a coherent unique locality; while various aspects of the city are made local, others are marked as foreign. Quayson shows how the street's built environment sets the conditions of daily life while stimulating its dwellers to move and act in creative ways, to reimagine what life was, is, and will be. Oxford Street is proverb-like; it provides an authoritative semiotic-material grounding for the action it provokes. It insults its citizens while winking at them; it makes things impossible for them while encouraging them to aspire to yet unimagined forms of commerce, mobility, and expression. Quayson's Oxford Street poetics also works through indirection, fragmentation, elision, and unexpected juxtaposition; like Chinua Achebe and Walter Benjamin, Quayson tells a story by replicating the processes that he is exploring. His text is a part of Accra's multifarious urban public rather than a distanced reflection on it. Its disparate parts have an underlying logic that incites readers to search for unexpected connections and double meanings, challenging its public, as Accra does, to be creative in the face of uncertainty. In its multidisciplinary mix it provokes scholarly and popular circulation. The author is a flaneur, mobile and detached from daily worries yet tuned in to the subtleties and small spaces that open up into broad sociological insights.

Quayson provides a framework for thinking about Accra's particularities, its infrastructures and historical layerings that order creative ways of life. What is it about Accra that speaks to various people, that creates intimacy and makes people feel that Accra is theirs? The city has a feeling of closeness: small personal spaces rapidly open into broader senses of past and feelings of futurity.

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Quayson stands still, paying attention. In close readings of spaces, words, images, bodies, money, and commodities, ghosts move across space and over time.

Oxford Street, Accra shows that theories of mobility, history, and urban life must be local and indeed address how ideas of locality are continually made and challenged. The periodic influx of people has shaped how Accra's citizens configure autochthony and foreignness; contextually specific theories of history shape urban space and its layerings of influence and settlement. Quayson takes up the example of how the Tabon, a group of Afro-Brazilians who returned to Ghana in the mid–nineteenth century, gain status and power. He describes how they maintain a sense of unique ethnocultural identity while being incorporated into the Ga peoples and appearing indigenous to Accra through their ritual and language practices and claims on land. He uses this example to critique simplistic ideas of culture, ethnicity, and multiculturalism and their intellectual and political effects and to show how the writing and erasure of the past shape city life. The dynamics of race, culture, and ethnicity become more regimented through the nineteenth century as the British gain hegemony over the coast and the Asante Empire consolidates its control over trade networks that link commodities and markets inland to the coast. Power dynamics on the coast shift. As coastal elites are seen increasingly as threats to British authority, they are sidelined from political and economic activity in the language of racial segregation.

Quayson takes up the theoretical concerns of historical anthropologists by tracing how various semiotic orderings collide to shape agency or, as Marshall Sahlins's notion of the structure of the conjuncture describes, how events and spaces defined by contact between competing semiotic systems refract multiple historical legacies into new potential futures. Quayson examines reflexive vernacular urban forms of history, from the oral narratives of Ga origins that shape land claims in colonial court cases to the gaps in the archives that elide the role that Afro-Europeans played in the making of African coastal life. Embodied forms of remembering and forgetting are active semiotic processes through which a people identifies itself in the context of broader structural forces. With this historical grounding Quayson sets actors in motion. He elaborates how contemporary signs and materialities give clues to the historical archaeology of the city. In Accra's layers, Quayson argues, are contradictory yet productive figurations that predispose its denizens to informal economic activity, rapid mobility, subtle humor, and indirect forms of inscription.

Accra, like other African cities, is defined both internally and externally by present failures that are blamed on local conditions. By focusing on the particularities of life in Accra, Quayson argues against persistent stereotypes that African cities lack history and are less cosmopolitan and modern than European ones. Drawing from Achille Mbembe, Jean Comaroff, John L. Comaroff, and Rem Koolhaas, he demonstrates that rather than an incomplete version of a European city, Accra is a model of transnational, Afro-modern life; instead of lagging behind Euro-American urbanity, Accra, like other global South cities, is a prescient model for creative worlds just emerging (Ray).

Quayson opens up conversations about vernacular metahistory—that is, the reflexive ways social actors naturalize some signs as traditional and local and others as strange and foreign.[2] This reflects recent concern among ethnographers and historians with autochthony in contemporary struggles over politics, identity, and territory (Apter). When Quayson states that he aims to rethink transnationalism, I hear him rejecting basic ideas of mobility in favor of a complex logic of urban historiography. Where, how, and in what media is the past made, remembered, and forgotten? In a city built on centuries of

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trade in goods and enslaved peoples, violent exploitation, entrepreneurial hustle, the constant movement and blending of people, and the continual rewriting of these processes, Quayson echoes Hegel and Benjamin, asking both his readers and the denizens of Accra, *How and when does history flash up, and what crises and erasures do these flashes refract?*

Quayson's brilliance lies in his multiple linguistic and social fluencies and in his ability to move among various scholarly and popular registers. His recognized skill in close textual reading and knowledge of postcolonial literary theory are evident in his dexterous, detailed analysis of song lyrics, a legal document, a signboard. The way he draws disparate material-semiotic registers together demonstrates a rare multidisciplinary elegance. His methodological fluidity reflects how Accra works and shows his intimate and scholarly knowledge of the city.

As a literary scholar Quayson is attuned to language as a way in to social spaces. The book's first half, on history, and its second half, on social practices, are grounded by the centering chapter on billboard, *tro-tro*, and taxi slogans read by an imagined observer on Oxford Street. Questions about the historical conditions of oral circulation are provoked by the ubiquity in Accra of proverb-like slogans. I am struck by Quayson's oscillations between stasis and movement: in experiencing the rapid mobility of people, signs, and commodities around Accra, Quayson stands still. He takes time to read street signs and dancing bodies as he would poems. Quayson treats reading as methodological pragmatism—using it as an ethnographic tool to collect and align evidence of different scales and social orders.

Both mobile and stationary spaces of writing and inscribing are central to Accra's aesthetics. People write slogans on trucks, cars, buildings, walls. According to Quayson, "cryptic and often wry observations" that appeared on lorries in the mid–twentieth century became "a permanent visible feature of the urbanscape, whether this was through the mobile surfaces provided by the lorries or, as became increasingly common, transferred to other surfaces such as makeshift sign-writing billboards and graffiti inscribed on barber shops, hairdressing salons, local chop bars, and even on people's houses" (132). More evidence would strengthen Quayson's argument that inscriptions on cars are the originary point of public slogans, and some discussion of how Accra's public culture of proverb-like inscriptions relates to that of other global cities would be useful. But Quayson's central assertion is key: that circulating pieces of text connect a Ghanaian public to a network of ubiquitous proverb-like phrases providing wry, ongoing critical commentary on the spatial-temporal logic of social life.

To make sense of how seemingly unrelated social practices come together, Quayson takes up sociolinguistic theory on "entextualization," which refers to the active and contingent ways that some pieces of discourse are foregrounded as texts while others are rendered as context. For linguists and performance analysts this notion has been a powerful tool for looking at how words, gestures, and all sorts of signs accrue meaning and value only in active, real-time events. The notion of entextualization allows us to examine the way that pieces of discourse become texts and are made detachable as highly mobile signs that link contexts and references, in the process grounding participants in a speech community.[3]

Quayson explores the contradictions of transnationalism as productive of life in Accra. One way people make sense of tensions and uncertainties is to transpose temporal logics into spatial orders. Let me explain by providing an extended example of how the sort of time-space transposition that Quayson opens up allows us to explore a local theory of mobility and immobility that speaks to

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his rethinking of transnationalism through reflexive, vernacular understandings of it.

My two historical ethnographies, *Living the Hiplife* and *Trickster Theatre*, based on twenty years of historical and ethnographic research, focus on how popular music and theater in Accra refract long-term historical dynamics and, in turn, reshape urban life. I use sociolinguistic tools to examine how performers on- and offstage draw together disparate established registers and stances to creatively imagine themselves as authoritative, future-oriented social agents. Looking at performances in the light of Quayson's reading of the city, we see how actors and audiences contest and naturalize power by making and remaking aesthetic orders. In the process, performances create conditions that organize daily existence and link purportedly separate spaces, genres, and groups through their structuring sensibilities.

Mobility—traveling, trading, living elsewhere, and returning—defines a type of value that shapes labor regimes and related popular imaginaries around the world. In this free-market era, mobility has become a commodified practice, unequally distributed across spaces and populations. It drives economic success by facilitating access to new markets for material and nonmaterial forms of value. It is a type of cultural capital, reframing national, territorial imaginaries through the value added by border crossing. But mobility takes on cultural and historical specificity, revealing key aspects of people's affective relations to "home" and how they imagine social success and failure. Recent discussions about the precarity of postindustrial labor conditions, which increases with the globalization of commodity and service networks, build on Marx by arguing that time is a value or a commodity or a raw material unevenly distributed (Standing). I want to extend this discussion to thinking about mobility not as a means to an end or a way to get somewhere but rather as a commodified form and a desired way of being that is defined and valued partially by its scarcity and impossibility.

In various West African contexts, mobility and travel have long dominated the processes that make social and economic value and empower social groups and individuals. Forms of upward and outward mobility also shape popular imaginaries of the subregion (Plageman). Stories of traveling abroad are common across expressive genres from traditional storytelling to video-films to comedy routines to hip-hop lyrics. Some tell of fabulous wealth acquired in Europe and America. Others describe failed hope and horrific tragedy. They often depict the creative hustles that aspirants concoct in order to leave the country. These tales build on established traditions, common to many African societies, in which, as the Ghanaian playwright Yaw Asare explained to me, "when a young man reaches the age of maturity, traveling abroad finalizes his education." Going abroad permeates the Ghanaian popular imagination and dominates the lives of many Accra denizens who dedicate all their resources to leaving the country. Foreign travel is a form of symbolic exchange with great risk of failure and the potential to produce fabulous wealth and social status. In narratives of travel the potential of extraordinary value haunts ordinary, daily life. Notions of movement as wealth link rural, urban, and international spaces, as well as various political, economic, popular, and religious realms; sagas of leaving home and of returning are central to understandings of place and identity in contemporary urban Ghana. They portray life abroad through the values of life at home. And while foreignness often stands in for fantastical wealth, home is associated with sweetness and with belonging. Most Ghanaians who travel plan to work hard, earn money, and return home to build a house and gain respect. Wealth acquired abroad should be brought home to celebrate its earner's success. The idea of home is cosmologically significant—the place where

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ancestors reside. When people die, "they return to their village" (in Akan, "Wo kɔ wo kurom"). But despite the promises of acquiring value abroad and returning, the ontological shift from being at home to being abroad transforms the relation between the two.

Mobility is related to moments of indeterminacy that sometimes go on for extended periods, of waiting and hoping to travel, of waiting and imagining a return, of failing to move, and mobility is related to the narrations that structure these periods.[4] Many people in Accra spend a lot of their time, money, and energy trying to leave. This endless optimism even in the face of obscenely slim odds has a pervasive effect on contemporary life, presenting an "obstacle to . . . flourishing" (Berlant 1). Instead of providing a path to success, fantasies of mobility constrain social possibility and personal fulfillment. The apparent potential that foreignness offers crowds out less fantastical pursuits of local social and economic work. In this sense the desire to travel leaves Ghanaians "bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming" (2). Ghanaian tales of (failed) travel speak to the conditions of their protagonists, but they also structure a feeling of free-market-oriented transnationalism in many twenty-first-century global South cities, in which desires for personal mobility are built on the fantasies of the disenfranchised.[5]

People get stuck in place, fantasizing about the potentials travel seems to hold. They can lose everything trying to leave or remain in a suspended state, never living in a present place as they focus their resources, time, and imagination on trying to leave. Some youths shape their lives around trying to get visas, investing in fake papers or a sham marriage. Tales of failed travel cast this state of arrested development as a common dream deferred. For those who die, lose everything, or remain in limbo, mobility is cast in dystopic terms.

The idea of traveling somewhere unknown to become successful is a central metaphor of possibility. Hope is objectified as a faraway place, just out of reach. Spatial distance promises future value. Economic and emotional frustrations are transposed into the purgatory of immobility.

On 10 March 2001, just two months after J. A. Kufuor's inauguration as Ghana's president, the government declared they would receive debt relief through the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative, run by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. Many Ghanaians felt humiliated, betrayed that the government had accepted HIPC status. The main campaign slogan of Kufuor's New Patriotic Party had been "vote for positive change." Kufuor promised opening of free markets, decreasing cost of living and fuel prices, better education, and new jobs. As one radio presenter told me, "Our sense of national pride had been cast aside." The condition threatened people's aspirational self-image; as another commentator explained, "Despite Ghana's economic trouble, we are not poor and backward in the same way as some other places in Africa."[6] Ghanaians did not want to be labeled or see themselves as dependent or peripheral. HIPC status was a central topic in state and private media, including newspapers and radio talk shows, as well as in daily conversations, pastors' sermons, and public discourse in general. As discourse about HIPC circulated rapidly across various publics, it was imbued with humor, ambiguity, and moral implication. A new word emerged: HIPC, pronounced "hip-ick," became a grammatically mobile index—a place or process, a noun or verb, a signifier designating an unsure signified (Pierre). Laments such as "Ghana, Yebɛ kɔ HIPC!" ("Ghana, we are going HIPC!"), uttered with mischievous humor and frustration, became common. The HIPC designation distanced Ghana from the West and from itself; HIPC became an unknowable location, compelling in its ambiguity and repulsive in its mystification of value.

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The idea of "going HIPC" provoked people's storytelling imaginations. As one friend joked to me, "We are supposed to go to a place that does not exist." The ambiguity between place and time—turning a temporal process of national recovery into a mystical location—became the basis for parodic tales. One version was told by the well-known comedian Ghana Boy, who created a sketch ridiculing the hope of HIPC. Dressed in his familiar costume, a giant foam map of Ghana, he mounted the National Theatre stage for a performance in April 2001 (Shipley, *Trickster Theatre*). After several short jokes, he recounted the travel exploits of an old man from a remote village.

> There was an elderly man from the countryside who had never traveled.
>
> When thousands of Ghanaians went to Nigeria in the 1970s for jobs, he stayed home. When many Ghanaians went to Sierra Leone he stayed home.
>
> But when the old man heard that everyone was "going HIPC," he decided he would go too.
>
> He went to the bus station and asked people where he could get a bus to HIPC, but no one seemed to know. He tried the train station, but could not find a train that would take him to HIPC. He went to the airport but he was not lucky because all the planes had departed. Finally, he found a plane but they asked him for his passport and he had none. But he was determined to go HIPC. So he stowed away in the wheel-well.
>
> When the plane landed in *Aboachere* [land of the whites/foreigners] they found him frozen like an ice block dripping from the bottom of the plane.[7]

The theater audience roared with laughter at the exploits of the "foolish" old man, ill-equipped to navigate changing modes of travel and conditions of contemporary life from village to urban center to abroad. The fact that Ghanaian audiences often laugh at tragedy is a clue to how exaggeration, humor, and misdirection shape the aesthetics of public storytelling. The tale of a man stuck in a plane's wheel well is apocryphal, drawing on numerous true and fictional tales of stowaways' misfortunes (Ferguson). Ghana Boy's version parodies hope and naive entrepreneurial thinking and warns about the impossibility of escape. This story reflects the continued willingness of Africans to take great risks stowing away, crossing the Sahara and Mediterranean, engaging in visa frauds, and hustling for the chance to leave their daily struggles for promises of a life in a foreign land. The old man's violent ending undermines the romance of travel, transforming desire into the finality of a horrific death. The old man dies through a willful mistranslation of what it means to "go."

Travel is fetishized as creating potential value through movement. By this logic HIPC as a policy that designates financial time becomes a place both desired and unknowable. The old man's confusion and lack of familiarity with technology, the English language, and the protocols of travel represent the hazards that global forces pose for Ghanaians. Assessing his story's popularity, Ghana Boy recounted to me, "Most members of the audience have a relative or know an old man like this character. Everybody has someone who has gone abroad and not returned. People who have not traveled think 'over there' is some magical place." The audience members who laughed at the old man's folly were anxious of being perceived as ignorant themselves. The old man's failure and his tragicomic end are ambivalent commentaries on the transnational travel imaginary. His tale is a nightmare of futility, the familiar story of someone who naively strives for escape, rendered helpless in the face of outside forces.

This story reflects how the hazards and potential of travel occupy much of the time, talk, thought, and activities of many young Ghanaians. As a mode of being and thinking, travel traps people in limbo, in the vast space-time in-between constituted by the perpetual

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state of trying to leave and trying to return and by the economic, moral, emotional, and symbolic structures that turn these brief periods into long-term modes of existence.

Mobility has its own morality and its semiotic logic. The circulation of parodic stories about going abroad cast foreignness into the popular imagination but also placed it beyond the storyteller's control. In the 1990s scholars argued about the creative ways that practices and signs from "outside are forever refigured and resignified in locally meaningful ways" in African public cultures (Piot 174). Popular tales of travel tragedy mark the edges of legibility and of public discourse's ability to make sense of and enfold the outside.

Quayson focuses on spaces and practices where the outside and the foreign are synthesized, where the hybrid appears local, and where the contradictory and inchoate are made productive. In the vernacular cosmopolitan spaces of Accra, authority is conferred through social actors' abilities to align disparate symbolic registers and to reencode outside forces as natural parts of local infrastructures. Fluency in code switching delineates the possibilities of critical practice in the daily life of Accra's populace.

But, as Quayson shows, contradictions, unfulfilled promises and desires, and partially completed transactions shape urban life.[8] Tales of failed travel and the transposition of spatial and temporal mobility show how stuckness continually re-creates the always incomplete opposition between local and foreign.

Quayson reflects in his conclusion on how the material conditions of class and economic position shape experiences of time and space. He argues that many without family money or regular work survive through the informal economy, which opens up new creative realms and practices (Shipley, *Living*). Quayson also points out that while the rich have leisure and space, the poor and those who occupy precarious labor positions have time. In this sense he casts time and space as contrasting and contradictory forms of value and potential value. This leaves readers reflecting on the affective, sensuous qualities of time and space. Time-space transpositions constitute the key qualia—semiotic nodes around which social subjects create and experience value and meaning in emotional and sensorial terms—that shape life in Accra. Social actors across Accra's landscape make and forget the past and resignify the present by turning time into space and vice versa. While being trapped politically and economically is experienced first as a temporal lag and then as a spatial stuckness, Ghana Boy and Quayson show how the feeling of nonprogress leads to new forms of urban creativity.

Notes

1. The epigraph is a lyric from the song "Ye Bounce Wo Visa" ("They Bounced Your Visa") on Reggie Rockstone's "hiplife" album *Me Na Me Kae* ("I'm the One That Said It" [Kassa Records, 1999]). Rockstone raps in Akan and in English.

2. For example, when hip-hop first became popular in Accra, in the 1990s, many saw it as foreign and, specifically, American. By 2000, however, its local variant, "hiplife," was being called the sound track of the Ghanaian nation (Shipley, *Living*).

3. Themes of rural-urban and transnational mobility are old ones in Accra's literary culture. Kobina Sekyi's play *The Blinkards* satirizes coastal elites who mimic European sensibilities. Ama Ata Aidoo's play *Anowa* explores the legacy of the slave trade and its erasure from local memory. Aidoo's collection *"No Sweetness Here" and Other Stories* also takes up travel, focusing on how women who travel and return feel alienated from home, while those who remain feel stuck and are defined by their lack of travel. As one character states, "But me, I have been here. I am one of those that sit in that village and wait for the travelers" ("Something" 120). Yaw Asare's play "Desert Dreams" portrays a group of Africans who pay to be taken across the Sahara to escape to Europe but are left to fend for themselves in the desert.

4. Recent scholarship on Africa tends to fold stories of travel into theories of migration, examining mobility through where people land. But the indeterminacy of

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contemporary travel and work and the commonality of failure disturb easy dichotomies of national territoriality and diaspora.

5. Since the 1980s the perceived increasing velocity of globalization that links labor, markets, and consumers has bred anxiety, as well as new desires, through the possibility of rapid movements between rural and urban, home and abroad (Morris).

6. I conducted confidential interviews with the radio presenter and the commentator in Accra in March 2001, shortly after the government declared its intention to accept HIPC status.

7. I transcribed and translated this story from an Akan-language recording of Ghana Boy's performance at the Key Soap Concert Party in April 2001 at the National Theatre of Ghana, Accra.

8. Ethnographers have pointed out how youths across Africa struggle to become adults in precarious contexts; frustration mounts and conflicts flare up as they remain stuck in time, lacking the resources to marry and build homes. Ideas of the passing of time, as well as customary, legal, and spiritual authorities, are reconfigured through incomplete transactions (White).

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