

HANNAH APPEL

The LICIT LIFE *of* CAPITALISM



U.S. OIL IN EQUATORIAL GUINEA

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No theory of history that conceptualized capitalism as a progressive historical force, qualitatively increasing the mastery of human beings over the material bases of their existence, was adequate to the task of making the experiences of the modern world comprehensible.

—Cedric J. Robinson,
*Black Marxism: The Making
of the Black Radical Tradition*

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	ix
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INTRODUCTION	1
1 THE <i>Offshore</i>	37
2 THE <i>Enclave</i>	79
3 THE <i>Contract</i>	137
4 THE <i>Subcontract</i>	172
5 THE <i>Economy</i>	204
6 THE <i>Political</i>	247
AFTERWORD	279

Notes	285
References	295
Index	317

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INTRODUCTION

Dawn in Bata, Equatorial Guinea's second city. At 6:00 a.m., I stood outside the headquarters of a large US-based oil company with a small group of others—a Spanish woman, a man from Louisiana, and two Equatoguinean men—waiting to “go offshore” by helicopter. We stood quietly and not quite together, separated by the early hour and by not knowing if we were all there for the same purpose. Eventually, an Equatoguinean driver pulled up in a company bus. As we boarded, he requested our identification passes to electronically register each of our exits from the compound, and then drove us to the company's private wing of the airport. After an airport worker searched our bags, we sat in a small room to watch a safety video on the importance of in-flight protective equipment and what to do if our helicopter were to catch fire in midair. At liftoff, the helicopter rose effortlessly as the city of Bata spread out beneath us. Further from shore, looking back, the Ntem River marked the edge of the continent. After a while, sights and sounds faded into the calm of the open ocean seen from above and the gently vibrating lull of the helicopter through noise-canceling headphones.

Eventually, a bright flame appeared in the distance, attached to an indistinct industrial atoll—a rig. Just as the rig came into view, the helicopter banked left to land briefly on what looked like an aircraft carrier, leaving the Spanish woman on what was, in fact, a Floating Production, Storage, and Offloading (FPSO) vessel. With the production rig visible some hundreds of yards away across the water, the FPSO was animated by its own large flare, burning the crude’s gaseous by-products. Both the rig and this vast, self-propelling, ship-like structure floated above a field producing 100,000 barrels of crude oil per day. Every ten days, a tanker pulled alongside the FPSO and left with one million barrels of oil. From subsea hydrocarbon deposits, to the rig, to the FPSO, to the tanker, and finally to market, Equatorial Guinea’s oil production chain was clearest to me by helicopter, far off the country’s shores.

Capitalism is not a context; it is a project.¹

This book offers an ethnographic account of the daily life of capitalism. It is both an account of a specific capitalist project—US oil companies working off the shores of Equatorial Guinea—and an exploration of more general forms and processes (the offshore, contracts, infrastructures, something called “the” economy) that facilitate diverse capitalist projects around the world. Each of these forms and processes, which organize the book, chapter by chapter, is both a condition of possibility for contemporary capitalism and an ongoing entanglement with the raced and gendered histories of colonialism, empire, and white supremacy out of which capitalism and *liberalism* emerged. Indeed, the book explores the relationship between the liberal modernity claimed by US oil companies—contractual obligation, market rationality, transparency—and the racialized global inequality that radically delimits the ways in which Equatorial Guinea and other postcolonial African countries might engage with multinational oil companies. Just as racism, patriarchy, and dispossession are not exceptions to liberalism, but constitutive of it (James 1963; Hartman 1997; Makdisi 1998; Chakrabarty 2000; Mills 2003, 2017; Stoler 1995, 2010; Mehta 1997, 1999; Byrd 2011; Lowe 2015), so too, this book argues, must we shift our critical understanding of capitalism from one in which “markets” merely deepen or respond to postcolonial inequality, to one in which markets are *made by* that inequality.² In Equatorial Guinea and around the world, accreted histories of racialized disparity “proxy” (Ho 2016) for rational, neutral market behavior—“the

rules of the economy.” Global markets, the oil market chief among them, do not merely take advantage of these circumstances; they are constituted by them.

This view from the helicopter window—through which Equatorial Guinea seems to recede; in which hydrocarbons seem to move effortlessly from one infrastructural node of the commodity chain to another; and where a space referred to as “offshore” seems to be a literal watery stage for placeless economic interaction—requires a tremendous amount of work. From manual, managerial, domestic, and political labor; to material infrastructures and technologies; to the legal, ethical, and affective framing processes required to lubricate the passage of oil and gas to market, the apparent smoothness of the offshore is made and remade in the quotidian project that is hydrocarbon capitalism in Equatorial Guinea. The view was redolent with qualities often thought to be intrinsic to capitalism: standardization, replicability, technical mastery, and the disembedding of economic interaction from social context. In contrast, the view from fourteen months of fieldwork in and around Equatorial Guinea’s oil industry demonstrated nothing more than the work required to produce tenuous and contested approximations of those ostensibly intrinsic qualities. This book describes these work-intensive processes as I found them in Equatorial Guinea.

Yet the view from the helicopter window is not only misleading; it is also productive.

If anthropology (at least in the poststructural moment, if not before) has concerned itself with rescuing local specificity and complexity from the abstracting distance of views like this one, this book is equally invested in understanding—ethnographically, theoretically, and politically—what these kinds of views do in the world. These views are not merely “wrong” in any narrow sense. On the contrary, they are performative in that they generate durable material and semiotic effects in the world.³ Insofar as anthropology and critical theory approach these abstracting views as fodder for deconstruction—to show contingency, complexity, heterogeneity, or locality “within” or “beneath” them—we fail to account for their performative work in the world. We seem to suggest that “mere” appearances are easily undone by ethnographic intimacy. On the contrary, something widely recognized as global capitalism persists despite that kind of deconstructive work. How? Ethnography can help us follow the work required to create the “as ifs” on which capitalism has so long relied: abstraction, decontextualization, and standardization. In this book, I take these as ifs *themselves* as ethnographic objects, aspirational processes, and political projects that we can follow in

the field. Rather than recovering the complexity and friction effaced by the view from the helicopter window, then, this ethnography accounts for how things come to *seem* smooth, how the US oil and gas industry works to *seem* separate, distanced, and outside of local life in Equatorial Guinea. As I will go on to chronicle, many of the people with whom I worked— itinerant oil company management in particular—were preoccupied each day with this work of abstraction and distancing: how to ensure that the production and export of oil from Equatorial Guinea might seem detached from local lives, histories, and landscapes.⁴

To use ethnography in this way—to follow the work of standardization, decontextualization, and distancing—allows us to attend to capitalism as a project; to show how it is at once uneven, heterogeneous, and contested and, at the same time, proliferative, powerful, and systemic. Holding these analytic poles in tension, as equally empirically true in the world, asks us to account for their simultaneity. How is it that both can be true? As with any project, capitalism's apparent coherence and momentum take work. This book offers an account of some of our world's most powerful corporations—US oil firms—and those who work with, alongside, and against them as they undertake this work in Equatorial Guinea. To be clear then, this book is not, in any simple way, an account of local inflections or instantiations of capitalism. Rather, it asks after the force and fulsomeness with which capitalism, in fact, seems to do all the things it is supposed to do: standardize, abstract, distance, and decontextualize. How can we account for these phenomena ethnographically, showing—despite the frictions and seams—how this work gets done?

Because this book's analytic trajectory follows the industry's work toward apparent distance and standardization, it is not *about* Equatorial Guinea in the conventional ethnographic sense. This is why I begin with a departure story of sorts—the helicopter leaving Bata for the offshore—rather than with the expected arrival story; this is the directionality of sociopolitical life and work I explore in the book. The ways in which this book is and is not about Equatorial Guinea are also choices about a certain kind of ethnographic refusal (Ortner 1995; Simpson 2014) on the one hand, and an ethnographic insistence on the other. Like Simpson (2014, 105) with the Iroquois (although very differently positioned as a white North American anthropologist), I refuse the “previous practices of discursive containment and pathology” that have plagued white textualizations of Equatorial Guinea. I refuse them not only because of their internal flaws, but also because these accounts “have teeth, and teeth that bite through time” (Simpson 2014, 100). My oil company

interlocutors used white textualizations of Equatorial Guinea, and Africa more broadly, to justify the violence of their industry's daily practices—from contracts that contravene Equatoguinean sovereignty to economic theory that locates the reliably grotesque local outcomes of oil production solely within the “pathological African state.” The industry used anthropology, history, economics, and political science to efface the agency of transnational corporate capitalism and to distance itself still further from that by which it was surrounded and to which it gave shape. The teeth of knowledge production, in the mouths of some of our world's most powerful corporations, indeed bite through time. Thus, this book does not offer a general ethnographic description of Equatorial Guinea (as if such a thing were possible), but a specific political history of the conditions of possibility that made a certain form of hydrocarbon capitalism possible.

This form of ethnographic refusal also contains an ethnographic insistence. If knowing, and if anthropological knowing in particular, has been a mode of power (Asad 1979; Said 1978, 1989; Foucault 1980), then this book advocates knowing more about that over which we need more power. It is *capitalism*—its ideologies and institutions, people and dreams, ecologies and erasures—that is my *ethnos*. Through that commitment, I stumbled upon capitalism's intimacy with liberalism, and that too became an ethnographic object. More precisely, I found liberalism *in the field*, or what Sartori (2014) calls vernacular liberalism: “the movement of liberal concepts beyond the rarified domains of self-conscious political theory . . . into wider worlds” (7). Specifically, I follow the ways in which oil company management and, to a lesser extent, Equatoguinean state actors use law, contracts, economic theory, and market rationality not only as powerful tools in and of themselves, but also as a felicitous moral architecture through which to sanction capitalist practices. Liberalism here “is not a thing. It is a moving target developed in the European empire and used to secure power in the contemporary world. It is located nowhere but in its continual citation as the motivating logic and aspiration of dispersed and competing social and cultural experiments” (Povinelli 2006, 13). Both liberalism and capitalism are always made through and with the things that anthropology has long been so good at capturing—specific people and histories, places and politics, landscapes and livelihoods. This is no less true in Equatorial Guinea, despite the fact that it is precisely these entanglements that the industry works so hard to sever.

Thus, this book *is* about Equatorial Guinea insofar as it is the historical specificity of that country leading up to US corporations' discovery of oil and gas which made the industry's work toward disentanglement so appar-

ent. Equally relevant to the story is the historical specificity of the US-based transnational oil and gas industry in the mid-1990s, the moment it discovered subsea hydrocarbons in Equatorial Guinea. *Both* histories—similarly steeped in secrecy, suppression, and violence—come to shape the project of petro-capitalism in the country. In the mid-1990s, Equatorial Guinea was governed by an authoritarian regime on its last legs, ready to acquiesce to nearly any industry condition in exchange for complicity and support. At the same moment, the industry was reeling from the rise of the global environmental movement, increasingly public breakthroughs in climate science, and the swelling power of transnational nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) (Kirsch 2014). In addition, Shell’s ongoing catastrophe in neighboring Nigeria—involving everything from the killing of Ogoni activists to the visible dispossession and despoliation of the Niger Delta (Adunbi 2015; Saro-Wiwa 1992; Watts 2004)—had made that case a model failure in the industry by the time investment in Equatorial Guinea began, not to be repeated at all costs. In this moment, respective histories of secrecy, the active suppression of information, and global pariah status in *both* Equatorial Guinea and the US-based oil and gas industry came together in resonant frequency, amplifying the silence and intimacy that has come to characterize their complicity.

Today, Equatorial Guinea is widely considered to have one of the most corrupt dictatorships in the world. The global oil and gas industry is similarly disreputable. How, then, at this intersection, are hydrocarbons so reliably transformed from subsea deposits into everything from gas to lipstick to futures prices? How is capitalism, in its own image, reliably reproduced at the intersection of an industry and a dictatorship (now the longest-standing in the world) that are equally notorious, illiberal, and constituted by histories of violence, destruction, suppression, and agnotology? In Equatorial Guinea and beyond, the oil and gas industry consistently escapes consequential responsibility for local outcomes, despite profound political, environmental, economic, and social entanglements in each and every supply site. *How?* This is the puzzle that this book seeks to address by focusing ethnographically on what I call the “licit life of capitalism”—contracts and subcontracts, infrastructures, economic theory, corporate enclaves, “transparency”—and the forms of racialized and gendered liberalism on which it relies for its moral architecture. These practices have become legally sanctioned, widely replicated, and even ordinary, at the same time as they are messy, contested, and, to many, indefensible.

Before setting out to understand the licit life of capitalism, this book’s ethnographic project, we must first understand that which *the licit* is set up to

manage, to distance itself from, and to frame out of the picture. To illustrate this, I start with a scene from the field that conveys the intimacy of absolute rule and transnational oil firms, before moving back briefly into Equatorial Guinea's colonial and postcolonial history to give a sense of the sociopolitical world which US oil companies entered—and then altered—starting in the late 1990s.

ON EQUATORIAL GUINEA

You get the land but you don't provide a lot of jobs, you may be destroying the environment, and most of the profit goes to international capital. The companies don't have a strong case to sell to local communities, so they come to not only accept highly centralized government but to crave it. A strongman president can make all the necessary decisions. It's a lot easier to win support from the top than to build it from the bottom. As long as we want cheap gas, democracy can't exist.

—Ed Chow, longtime Chevron executive, quoted in
Ken Silverstein, *The Secret World of Oil*

Elena, an Equatoguinean friend, called one afternoon to invite me to an outdoor dinner at a Spanish-style tapas place. Our dinner companions were three other people I didn't know well—two visiting American lobbyists employed by the Equatoguinean government, whom I had met briefly on one of their earlier visits, and an Equatoguinean woman I'd never met who was introduced to me at the beginning of dinner as “an entrepreneur.” The five of us ambled through normal (for Equatorial Guinea) dinner conversation. The woman had a new iPhone, and we talked about the recent statistic that Equatorial Guinea had the highest per capita percentage of iPhone users in the world. We also discussed the construction boom and how bad the harmattan was expected to be this year. Soon the conversation turned toward my research, and the two American men and the Guinean woman⁵ began asking me a series of questions about my project: “How is it going? Who are you interviewing? What are you finding out? How do you get your information?” I answered with my usual mix of candor and vagueness. “It's going well. I interview locals and expats who work in the oil industry. I'm finding out that things are more complicated than they seem.” As the question-and-answer session continued, Elena began to press her foot on mine under the

table. I wondered if she had mistaken my foot for the table base, and I gently moved my foot from under hers as I continued talking. Gradually talk turned to politics, and I was careful, as always, to be my best noncommittal self as I listened to what the others had to say (also noncommittal, vapid statements) and responded with vagaries of my own. “How well adjusted I am to living in a paranoid dictatorship,” I thought to myself as I again moved my foot from under Elena’s.

We finished our beers and said our goodbyes, and I got in Elena’s car to head home. I was in trouble. The “entrepreneur,” it turns out, while she did have her own store, also worked for national intelligence, and, of course, Elena knew this because everyone knows everyone in Malabo. She was not able to tell me this before we arrived, however, not knowing who would be attending the dinner. As Elena yelled frantically at me in the car about how naïve I was to talk about my research, I tried to stutter in protest that I intentionally said nothing political or dangerous, and that in terms of politics, I had also been vague and effectively said nothing. She said that it didn’t matter. They can take any little piece of information and twist it the wrong way. “A banana,” as another informant put it, “is a stone.” And worse, it was not only me that I was endangering, but also *her*. “They killed a French guy and framed his Guinean friend for the murder,” she said. “I would be blamed for your death!”

Rattled by Elena’s fear and anger at my ignorance (her foot was an intentional, repeated effort to shut me up), and wondering about the actuality of it all—death by research, friends framed for my death—the next day I approached Isabel, my closest friend in the field who was also rising through the ranks of the government. I was wide-eyed, agitated, and incredulous as I told her my story about Elena’s anger; about being told that the intelligence operative was an “entrepreneur”; and about how I had answered questions about my research vacuously. Isabel listened calmly, nodding slowly, saying nothing. When I finished, looking at her expectantly, she returned my gaze with a quiet, knowing smile and a silence that seemed to last forever. And then she said, “Welcome.” Having returned to Equatorial Guinea only six years earlier from a life abroad, Isabel said that the same thing happened to her upon her return. She told me it was valuable experience for my research “to experience the fear we all live in.” “If you’re not involved with locals,” she said, “you’ll never experience it. You have to figure out how to write about this.”

As Elena’s foot, Isabel’s “Welcome,” and Ed Chow’s words that begin this section all suggest, there is a mutually beneficial relationship between

absolute rule and transnational oil firms. It is a relationship characterized by impunity and secrecy on both sides, and by a form of collusion Anna Tsing (2005) has described as franchise cronyism, “in which foreign funds support the authoritarian rule that keeps the funds safe. . . . In exchange for supplying the money to support national leaders who can make the state secure, investors are offered the certainties of the contract, which ensures titles to mineral deposits, fixes taxation rates, and permits export of profit” (69). The licit life of capitalism—the industry’s striving for capitalism in its own image—is uniquely evident in Equatorial Guinea precisely because of the specific political histories of the place, histories that led dramatically to the fear in which Equatoguineans had long lived by the time US oil companies came to town.

A BRIEF HISTORY

While Spain had technically gained imperial rights to “Spanish Guinea” in 1777, it was not until the late nineteenth century that Spanish sovereignty was fully recognized on Bioko Island (then called Fernando Pó), and it was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that Spanish missionaries had even *seen* the interior of Río Muni, let alone established administrative rule or systems of economic extraction of any kind (Ndongo-Bidyogo 1977; Nerín 2010; Martino 2012). While Spanish administrative presence was minimal in the early years of colonialism, foreigners of various nationalities out to make money were not, at least on the main island. Bioko remained a crucial, dynamic economic site, characterized as a “watering hole of explorers, traders and missionaries” at the end of the nineteenth century (Fegley 1989, 13). Río Muni, on the other hand, receded still further from its earlier small role in the slave trade (Aranzadi, forthcoming). Where Bioko was an economically and politically strategic holding, with increasing Spanish presence if not rule, Río Muni, at least for a time, “was viewed as a magnet for the border population [from Gabon and Cameroon] because it was a place where censuses, native taxation, levies, and native justice [were] unknown. According to one French Official, it was possible for Africans to live ‘in complete freedom’ in Río Muni” (Sundiata 1990, 34).⁶ Cameroonian author Ferdinand Oyono (1966) says as much in the opening of his novel *Houseboy*:

It was evening. The sun had gone down behind the peaks. The deep shadow of the forest was closing in around Akomo. Flocks of toucans cut the air with great wingbeats and their plaintive calls died away slowly. The last night of

my holiday in Spanish Guinea came stealthily down. Soon I would be leaving this country used by us “Frenchmen” from Gabon and Cameroon as a place to slip away for a break whenever things became a little strained between ourselves and our white compatriots. (3)

When the Spanish Civil War broke out in 1936, most Spanish settlers in Equatorial Guinea were passively associated with the anti-Franco Popular Front, but their resistance was easily overwhelmed by troops sent from Spain. By the end of the year Spanish Guinea was securely in Franco’s hands, “contributing money, raw materials and food to the long and bitter campaign against the republic” (Roberts 1986, 543). Franco’s victory in 1939 marked a dual shift in the daily life of colonial rule in Equatorial Guinea, creating more metropolitan interest and investment on the one hand, and more oppressive, violent, and sharply racist rule on the other. Remembering his schooling in the 1940s and 1950s, Equatoguinean journalist and Fanon scholar Donato Ndong-Bidyogo writes: “‘Are we Spanish?’—the teacher would ask the class—‘we are Spanish by the grace of God!’ . . . Entering school in the morning you had to stand in formation, do five or ten minutes of military gymnastics, sing ‘Cara al Sol’ [the anthem of Franco’s Falangist party] while saluting. ‘I am a Falangist, I will be a Falangist until I die or overcome. Long live Spain!’” (1977, 66). While on school grounds, students were required to speak Spanish exclusively, regardless of their age or how long they had been studying the colonial language. “Those that disobeyed or could not communicate sufficiently were lashed, or made to kneel for hours on gravel. This was not cultural assimilation. This was cultural assimilation at gun point” (66). Colonialism under Franco was radically and unpredictably violent for black Equatoguinean adults as well, whose movements around the island and mainland, or in between, were *de facto* forbidden but *de jure* governed by a pass system. Equatoguineans could be beaten, jailed, and killed at any time without recourse. The arbitrary violence that characterized Franco’s colonial fascism—authoritarian dictatorship, military rule, forced labor, radical limitations on movement, and rampant executions—would later come to characterize postcolonial rule in Equatorial Guinea as well.

By the late 1950s and early 1960s, anticolonial sentiment and organizing was growing in Equatorial Guinea and across the continent. After unsuccessfully trying to co-opt the majority of nationalist Equatoguineans, the colonial administration proposed a vote for *autonomy* (not independence), which Equatoguineans passed, thus establishing a General Assembly of colonial administrators who, in turn, named a ten-member Consejo de Gobi-

erno, or Government Council of Equatoguineans. This council included, among others, Francisco Macías Nguema, the former mayor of Mongomo (an inland continental district on the border with Gabon), and other authority figures from within what Mamdani (1996) has characterized as the native bureaucracies of indirect rule: those Equatoguineans who had been enlisted by the colonial government as “traditional,” often meaning rural, legal, and fiscal authorities. Ndongo-Bidyogo (1977) argues that the Spanish were grooming the Equatoguineans named to the Government Council for their emergent role as the national bourgeoisie, to serve as mediators with Spain both politically—where their complicity guaranteed autonomy but not independence—and economically—wherein council members guaranteed Spain continued access to local riches and resources. In exchange, council members “were given exorbitant salaries, a Mercedes Benz, a chalet replete with servants paid by Spain, and control over the national budget” (105).

Here too, the conflation of public office with private gain that began under colonialism (Martino 2018b) set an important foundation for the expectations and norms of postcolonial Equatoguinean regimes to come. The Governing Council adopted a predictably pro-Spanish line, but Macías Nguema, in particular, began to separate himself ideologically, refusing to accept the Spanish agenda and beginning to talk about opposition to neo-colonialism. In February 1968, only four years after the autonomous regime began, Equatoguinean politicians demanded independence at a constitutional conference in Spain, and Franco’s regime passed a decree suspending the renewal of autonomous status. Equatorial Guinea held its first election as an independent nation-state on October 12, 1968, and Francisco Macías Nguema was elected president.

Trouble started almost immediately. In the month following independence, Spain promised financial help that never came. Records from the cocoa, coffee, and timber exports of 1968 showed that there should have been roughly \$43 million in the bank (in 1968 dollars; roughly \$300 million in 2017), but the national accounts were empty. The Spanish had stolen the money. Macías’s relationship with Spain deteriorated rapidly. The Spanish settlers who remained began to openly provoke the newly independent government in an effort, Ndongo-Bidyogo (1977) argues, to precipitate a confrontation and “justify the intervention of the fully armed 270 members of the Spanish army still in the country” (154). As Equatoguineans began to speak up about corporal punishment, as well as racist language on plantations and in Spanish-owned businesses, the Spanish ambassador responded by threatening to withdraw the Spanish doctors, engineers, teachers, ad-

ministrators, and media operators who continued to run the country's basic social infrastructure.

Not three months after assuming the presidency, Macías (quite reasonably) began to suffer from what Ndong-Bidyogo (1977) called the “paranoia and psychosis” of assassination attempts and coups. And indeed, in February 1969, Spanish soldiers occupied the airport and media production centers, distributing arms to all remaining whites, who then patrolled the streets. A mere four months after independence, then, the Spanish organized a coup attempt, provoking Macías to declare a state of emergency, still referred to today as *la emergencia*. Macías asked all Spanish settlers who remained in the country to leave, including the missionaries who ran schools and orphanages, which left Equatorial Guinea largely without technical experts. Algerians came on technical missions as doctors and nurses, but they didn't speak Spanish and struggled to serve a population in a moment of chaotic transition. Schools were closed; children roamed the streets in large numbers; food imports were disrupted; and many people left their towns for the cities of Malabo and Bata, hoping to find more institutional stability. Thousands of Nigerians, who had long provided much of the manual labor on cocoa plantations, also began to leave, spurred by Macías's decree forbidding wage remittances to support the Biafran secession. In short, both the technocracy and the manual labor that had sustained Equatorial Guinea during the colonial era disappeared essentially overnight.

In the wake of the Spanish coup attempt, March 1969 marked the official beginning of a period Guineans to this day call *la triste memoria*, the sad memory. The few doctors who remained from Algeria, Egypt, and Nigeria began to leave in response to orders from Macías not to cure ill people considered “counterrevolutionaries.” Jails began to fill with “persons of suspicion”—people Macías perceived to be political opponents—most of whom died in prison. By Christmas 1969, Macías had jailed, tortured, and killed all politicians he perceived to be against him. All incoming mail was searched and censored, on penalty of death to the intended recipient should the censors dislike what they read. Spain responded with a press war, calling openly for another coup, to which Macías responded by launching a campaign against all Equatoguineans who were in Spanish universities or who had ever studied there. “Intellectual” became a word punishable by jail or worse. In response, Franco's Ministry of External Affairs switched course, using the Law of Official Secrets to declare all information about Equatorial Guinea and its relationship with Spain *materia reservada*—strictly confidential and not to be covered by any media. At this point, “Equatorial Guinea

virtually dropped out of the news. Macías closed down most of the press, instated severe censorship and banned all foreign journalists. Visas became very difficult to obtain. After 1970 there was not one reliable economic figure, government statistic or census report to be found in the country. . . . The Franco regime further aided and abetted Macías by maintaining strict silence from the beginning” (Fegley 1989, 72).

In the years that followed, Macías began to jail his own ministers; publicly execute people who had served in the pre-independence government; and persecute, detain, and execute clergy. In 1970, he outlawed political parties and created PUNT—el Partido Unico Nacional de Trabajadores, or the Unified National Workers Party. The youth wing of PUNT—Juventud en Marcha con Macías (Youth Marching with Macías)—was given free rein to accuse and attack others with impunity. In policies reminiscent of Falangist colonial practice and in active dialogue with Maoist practice of the day, military drills became compulsory for the entire population, including children as young as five and pregnant women, and Equatoguineans were forbidden from traveling within or leaving their country freely. Having declared himself president for life in 1972, Macías once again enclosed Guineans in their homeland, “by laws so similar to those from the colonial period that one could hardly note a difference” (Ndongo-Bidyogo 1977, 215). With economic production nearly at a standstill in the wake of the first Nigerian exodus, Macías decreed compulsory labor from Equatoguinean citizens (unpaid labor from all men).⁷ Those able to escape streamed across the borders. In response, Macías redoubled the compulsory labor act and jailed or killed people caught escaping.

Nominally socialist, Macías cultivated relations with Cuba, China, and the USSR throughout the 1970s, although his regime alienated each in turn. By 1975, doctors and medical care were officially outlawed. (Most medical professionals in the interceding years had been Cuban.) Amidst cholera outbreaks, a resurgence of leprosy, and a population either fleeing or dying, Macías stopped the circulation of all boats to prevent further escape, thereby indiscriminately prohibiting all crafts used for fishing or those that fitfully brought medicines and food to the smaller islands of Annobón, Corisco, and the Elobays. When, after a year’s time, a group finally sailed to Annobón, half of the inhabitants were dead; the other half were transferred to Bioko as enslaved labor. “Spain, which could’ve intervened in this growing isolation not only as the former colonial power but more importantly as home to the best educated Equatoguineans, retained an ironclad silence—a long chain of international complicity. Even those [Equatoguineans] who wanted

to organize an opposition in Spain were radically stifled by the repression and secrecy of the Franco regime” (Ndongo-Bidyogo 1977, 270). In January 1976, Macías refused a mass repatriation request from the remaining Nigerian laborers. Nigeria responded by sending war ships into the waters surrounding Malabo, and Macías fled from the capital on Bioko Island to the interior of the continental region. *From this moment on, President Macías never returned to Bioko Island, or to the capital city.* Having burned, razed, and evacuated the towns of his perceived enemies, Macías was “pursuing the phantasms in his ill and tormented mind. . . . ‘When the opposition comes,’ he declared, ‘they will find nothing but ashes’” (Ndongo-Bidyogo 1977, 273).

By 1978, at least 20,000 people had been killed in a country with a population of roughly 300,000. Another one-sixth of the population was forcibly recruited as slave labor on cacao and coffee plantations and in timber yards. One out of every three Equatoguineans had become a refugee (Fegley 1989). An estimated 60,000 fled to Gabon; 30,000 to Cameroon; and several thousand to Nigeria. By 1978, roughly 6,000 Equatoguineans lived in Spain.

During my time in Equatorial Guinea between 2006 and 2008, in talking about *la triste memoria*, friends and informants agreed that Macías suffered from serious mental illness (many mentioned schizophrenia) that worsened progressively and monstrously during his decade as president (Sundiata 1983). Very few people were willing to condemn him individually, noting that by the end of *la emergencia*, he was completely incapacitated mentally and refused to leave his continental compound in Nsork. For years toward the end of his rule, the capital city, and indeed the country, were effectively no longer under his command; others were carrying out the terror. By 1975, all sophisticated weaponry, vehicles, aircraft, and boats were held under the control of three or four commanders. Leading these was Lieutenant Colonel Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, who was “virtually the ruler of [Bioko] while Macías isolated himself” (Fegley 1989, 162). A graduate of the Spanish military academy at Zaragoza, Obiang was among Macías’s closest adherents. As Deputy Minister of Defense, he was in charge of the penitentiary system on Bioko Island, including both local precincts and the infamous Blackbich (Black Beach) Prison where so many had died. In these capacities, Obiang “spoke and acted with the authority of the president and personally saw that his punishments were carried out” (Fegley 1991, 162; Liniger-Goumaz 1989). And it was Obiang who, in 1979, overthrew President Macías in a coup. Thanks to US oil firms, Obiang remains president to this day.

After overthrowing Macías, Obiang announced that he would rule the country with the Consejo Militar Supremo, or Supreme Military Council

(SMC), which would also put Macías on trial in a courtroom hastily laid out in Malabo's Marfil Cinema. (Law and its infrastructures had dissolved under Macías, a fact that becomes unduly important once US oil companies arrive.) Charges against Macías initially included genocide, mass murder, and the embezzlement of public funds; however, because those running the Supreme Military Council, including Obiang himself, were directly implicated in those atrocities, the charges were quickly limited to 101 proven murders. When the trial eventually proceeded, the accusations were limited further still to the period between 1969 and 1974, "after which time most members of the SMC were involved in the terror" (Fegley 1989, 167). Found guilty of 101 murders, Macías was executed by a firing squad and Obiang took power.

Despite the fearsome continuities between the two regimes, Obiang's coup brought immediate and meaningful changes to Equatoguineans' daily lives. After roughly nine years of school closures, my friends and interlocutors remembered all of a sudden being able to go to school. Churches too, which had been forbidden and closed, were reopened. People recalled to me dressing up and going to church again, with long lines for new and retroactive baptisms. Economically, there were immediate changes as well. One could go to the market and buy chicken and pork, rice and oil, bread and candy. An Equatoguinean friend who had been a child at the time remembered this moment as a switch from plastic sandals to the availability of sneakers. Indeed, foreign aid poured in with the advent of Obiang's rule, including millions of dollars from the Spanish, as well as large multilateral loans. Obiang released thousands of prisoners and received the first resident ambassador from the US in 1981. Declaring his regime's nonaligned openness to aid from the East and West, Obiang began the process of joining the French-aligned Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC) in 1982, and the nation's currency changed officially from the *ekuele* to the CFA franc in 1985.

But formidable continuities lingered. The country was under military rule without foreseeable end; the press and political parties remained illegal. Open political dissidents, including Eugenio Abeso Mondu and Pedro Motu, were killed in Obiang's early years. After a decade of Obiang's rule, Equatorial Guinea was drowning in multilateral debt and bereft of any political freedoms. A handful of people who were not politicians, but university professors, doctors, and engineers—Placido Mico, Pablo Mba, Fernando Abaga, and Jose Luis Mvumba—began to mobilize against political killings and military rule with the clandestine distribution of pamphlets containing information about the current regime. Their movement built toward the presidential elections of 1992 when Severo Moto ran in opposition to Obiang,

after which Moto was arrested, incarcerated, and released. The terrain for oppositional mobilization was rocky at best; however, between 1992 and 1995, aided by loan conditionalities that required the superficial legalization of political parties, *Convergencia para la Democracia Social* (Convergence for Social Democracy, or CPDS) gained power. Then in 1995, the *Plataforma de Posicion Conjunta* (an opposition coalition) won a majority in the municipal and parliamentary elections. In other words, nearly two decades after Obiang took power, the conjuncture of deep debts and an opposition coalition looked like it might finally unseat the dictatorship. And indeed, 1995 was a watershed year, although not in the way this election victory indicates. The US government had closed its embassy in the country that year, in part to protest human rights abuses. Nearly simultaneously, the company then-called Exxon discovered that the Zafiro oil field had production capacities three times greater than the company's entire worldwide output of oil and gas at the time. "The following year, in advance of the presidential election, ExxonMobil's petro-dollars bankrolled the involvement of a US lobbyist who helped legitimize a rigged contest in which Obiang claimed 97.8 percent of the vote from the same constituency that only months earlier had opted overwhelmingly for the opposition coalition" (Alicante 2017). Indeed, the Exxon-funded group, the Institute for Democratic Strategies, played a pivotal role in the manufacture of Equatorial Guinea's 1996 presidential election (Shaxson 2008). "And that" an opposition member of parliament put it to me succinctly, "was when petroleum started. Petroleum was like a life jacket for the regime, an oxygen balloon to help it float." An oxygen balloon for dictatorship and a lead weight for democracy.

Since the discovery of commercially viable hydrocarbon deposits in Equatorial Guinea in the mid-1990s, the country has received nearly \$100 billion in capital deployment from US oil and gas companies alone. Among Africa's most important oil producers, the long-impoverished microstate is now at the center of the petroleum industry's "new Persian Gulf." At its peak in 2009, Equatorial Guinea exported ninety thousand barrels of oil per day to the US alone (US Energy Information Administration [USEIA] 2016) and is today the richest country per capita on the African continent. Production sharing contracts worth billions of dollars annually to companies and the state alike require protracted negotiation and complicity between US oil companies and Obiang's authoritarian regime, which, at forty years strong (as of 2019), makes Obiang the longest continuously serving

leader in the world today. For this repressive regime, once crippled by external debt burdens and threatened by an opposition coalition, US oil and gas contracts have been an unparalleled state-making project. In exchange for a funded regime, the Equatoguinean government must negotiate with oil companies to change local environmental, labor, or taxation laws that might affect those companies' profit margins. Ostensibly progressive laws requiring 35 percent local ownership of all foreign assets are abided with highly placed Equatoguineans serving as well-paid "associates" (*socios*) for foreign companies. The Equatoguinean state and US oil companies unevenly share governance and sovereignty in a complicated and profoundly unequal relationship of corporate–sovereign interdependency (Cattellino 2011; Mitchell 1991).

If the political landscape has been transformed by the oil and gas industry, so too has Equatorial Guinea's physical landscape, which has transmogrified at a hallucinogenic pace. Offshore gas flares blaze against the nights' dark skies in an uninterrupted string that seems to stretch from Nigerian waters all the way down. La Planta screams into view as planes land in Malabo's airport. Dazzlingly bright, the natural gas and methanol plant is a tangled, illuminated kingdom of small and large pipes, with some pipes big enough to fit a car inside, connecting metal vats and silos and containers and wires and more pipes and conveyor devices and cranes, all weaving in and out of one another. It seems the plane will scrape its metal belly on the highest reaches of the plant. The small capital city in the distance is dim and receding, or at least it was when I first started research in 2006. Yet there, now, contractual clauses built entire cities as if overnight (Appel 2012d). Malabo II sprouted beside colonial Malabo and, dotted with Chinese and Egyptian construction workers, asphalt extended filament-like in all directions (Mba 2011). Stadiums, palaces, skyscrapers, conference centers, hotels, and vast housing and apartment complexes rose from red dirt exposed beneath equatorial green only days before. In 2013, Equatorial Guinea saw more investment as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) than any other country in the world (Harrison 2013; Appel 2018a).

This extraordinary intensity of infrastructure investment has entirely remade the small country's property regime, as the president publicly expropriates his own substantial holdings "in the name of development," while oil and gas companies rent what is still widely considered "his" land. *Los de a pie* (the masses; literally, those on foot or those who walk) are expected to equate their dispossession with the president's hollow act. Gated residential and corporate enclaves for migrant industry personnel spring up in these spaces, serviced by their own sewage, septic, electricity, telecommunications, and

food procurement systems (Ferguson 2006, chapter 2). The infrastructures of both hydrocarbon production and development—from rigs to hydroelectric dams, gated corporate enclaves to freshly paved roads and entirely new cities—become key sites in which companies and the state negotiate the ethical and political entanglements of hydrocarbon capitalism (Appel 2012d).

In 2014, petroleum revenue (from crude oil and gas condensate production) accounted for roughly 90 percent of Equatoguinean government income and over 90 percent of total exports (IMF 2015). As Equatorial Guinea's reserves decline toward exhaustion and the global price of oil continues to fall, both of these figures are down from 2008's numbers of 98 percent of government revenue and 99.3 percent of the nation's exports (IMF 2010; República de Guinea Ecuatorial 2010). While local employment in both the service sector and construction expanded marginally in Equatorial Guinea's boom times, the oil and gas industry remains the only large employer other than public administration, and work therein schedules Guineans' daily lives, putting them in security guard or maid uniforms, or sending them to offshore platforms for weeks at a time. The industry has enabled some Equatoguineans to return from earning degrees abroad and work as government liaisons or accountants, while it has enabled others to engage in sex work and window washing. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs subcontracted to international development firms fan across cities and towns, offering education reform, malaria control, the provision of hospital equipment, and neighborhood drinking wells.

If US oil companies immeasurably stabilized Obiang's regime—essentially paying him to stay in power—the coming of the industry has also given rise to interstitial spaces that before seemed foreclosed by control, surveillance, and paranoia. As Adelaida Caballero (personal communication, 2015) has written, some Equatoguineans (though certainly not those active in any kind of opposition) now joke that the *dictadura* has become a *dictablanda*.⁸ At the very least, thousands of international industry personnel come and go every year, loosening (at least in the capital city) the sense of hermetic claustrophobia and isolation that had long enveloped this small country. Citizens of the US (and now of China, also) no longer need visas to visit the country, greatly facilitating the increased entry of journalists and researchers. The Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (see chapter 6) briefly mandated something close to civil society meetings, in which citizens were invited to talk about governance and oil revenue. But Equatoguineans doubt the potential of these spaces, and with good reason. The memory of indiscriminate violence and death is also its threat (Ávila Laurel 2011).

Guineans remember *la triste memoria*. They whisper about it. To the extent that little except mass killings or incarceration changed under Obiang, the sadness continues, albeit in different ways for different people. For wealthy, educated Guineans who have returned from lives and educations abroad to pursue their fortunes in this homeland of new and seemingly infinite possibilities, the change is radical and exciting. Familial memories of violence pester, however, and they too whisper about them in hushed voices around the dinner table. But their experience of home is, at least in part, one of renewal and possibility, and they often defend Equatorial Guinea against its critics in one moment, and shake their heads in defeat and disgust in the next. For the poor, most of whom did not leave, or perhaps found themselves in Gabon rather than in Spain or England, opportunity means jobs as security guards or maids, along with new restaurants and cars that they can't afford lining the streets. They are promised public housing in the boggling construction as they are dispossessed of the land on which they lived (Mba 2011; Appel 2018a).

In this time of radical change, it was not only Equatorial Guinea's history that mattered. The US-based transnational oil and gas industry's own histories of violence, subjugation, secrecy, and misinformation had also reached a specific moment in the mid-1990s. From long histories of complicity with and support for repressive regimes (Adunbi 2015; Saro-Wiwa 1992; Yergin 1993; Mitchell 2011; Silverstein 2014; Watts 2004; Vitalis 2007) to the enduring corporate practice of organizing their transnational labor force as "divided, segregated, and paid different wages according to race" (Vitalis 2007, 22; Butler 2015), and from violent dispossession, displacement, and despoliation of communities and ecosystems (Sawyer 2004; Saro-Wiwa 1992; Falola and Genova 2005) to the industry's role as the Angel of the Anthropocene, the turn of the twentieth century was a time of unprecedented exposure and critique of the US-based oil and gas industry. In response, major corporations began to implement a suite of practices—from more aggressive corporate social responsibility agendas to participation in various transparency and accountability programs, including the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative.⁹ These practices were designed to change the growing perception that oil companies were nothing but the necessary evil of modernity.

While corporate social responsibility and transparency programs are largely outward facing, designed to secure oil and gas corporations' increas-

ingly tenuous social license to operate, perhaps the most profound change that occurred in the industry at this moment *seemed* like an inward-facing change and like a feat of engineering: the offshore. As this book will go on to detail, oil's offshore is not merely a response to geologic fact—whether hydrocarbon deposits are located subsoil or subsea—but also an infrastructural *choice* intended to minimize the political risks of visible, accessible production. Equatorial Guinea came on-stream at just the historical moment when—largely in response to the unmitigated disaster in Nigeria—the industry decided that the offshore was useful not only as an organizing principle for industrial operations, but also as a guiding metaphor for its relationship to production sites more broadly. For US companies in Equatorial Guinea during my research, *not to be like Nigeria* was a mantra, shorthand for Shell Nigeria's infamously disastrous presence in the Niger Delta. In particular, the mantra gestured to the robust structures of responsibility that typified corporate involvement in Nigeria, with Shell providing often-unreliable water, light, or education in a tangled relationship with local states (Watts 2004; Zalik 2006, 2009; Saro-Wiwa 1992).¹⁰ The industry setup in Equatorial Guinea was a self-conscious and explicit response to this ongoing disaster. At least on paper, the arrangement between US oil companies and that which is “outside” them in Equatorial Guinea was radically attenuated, with corporate social responsibility subcontracted out and companies separated by multiple layers of liability from that which surrounded them. “Offshore” was shorthand for this shift, and thus it referred not only to mid-ocean production platforms, but also to the guiding metaphor of apparent distance between corporate and national daily life.

It is important to refuse the industry account of the offshore as a technical breakthrough that enabled radically different forms of work, profit-making, or corporate relationships to place. Rather, we might better understand offshore infrastructure as enabling certain forms of *continuity*. Practices that had been met with increasing resistance onshore—unimpeded environmental degradation; labor suppression, including paying workers according to race, and providing separate and strikingly unequal housing facilities; and lack of meaningful training or technology transfer opportunities—can be newly naturalized in offshore work, ostensibly justified by the novel technosocial configuration of the open ocean, the geophysical demands of subsea hydrocarbon, and the forms of infrastructure necessary to respond to those conditions (not to mention the invisibility of the production setup to the general public; Zalik 2009). With onshore communities seemingly disintermediated by the offshore production process, and resistance itself presented

with new spatial challenges, forms of national rule, regulation, oversight, and state-corporate complicity become increasingly central to the production of oil and gas in the offshore era. In other words, the US industry's long history of active collusion with authoritarian regimes was particularly relevant to its mid-1990s arrival in Equatorial Guinea.

While, as this book will show, the Equatoguinean state is fractious and divided, and far from a homogeneous oppressive force, each and every Equatoguinean I came to know (whether functionary, tycoon, or *a pie*) was afraid of The State in one way or another. That fear facilitated unimpeded oil production without meaningful public participation. Recall again Ed Chow's words from the earlier epigraph: "A strongman president can make all the necessary decisions. It's a lot easier to win support from the top than to build it from the bottom. As long as we want cheap gas, democracy can't exist" (in Silverstein 2014, 7). Press and state-independent media, the possibility of gathering in groups for political debate, and even the willingness to articulate critical ideas and opinions outside the privacy of one's home or close associates were all but absent and often illegal in Equatorial Guinea during my time there. With the few exceptions of citizens openly affiliated with the opposition, who experience regular jailing and other forms of harassment and abuse, "everyone is in their own corner," as one of my friends put it (*Todo el mundo está en su propia esquina*).¹¹

This, then, is the historical conjuncture at which Equatorial Guinea and the US oil and gas industry found one another. And it is this conjuncture that the licit life of capitalism is set up to manage. Given these histories of violence and suppression, *how* is Equatorial Guinea converted into just another oil exporting place? How do oil and gas emerge *as if* untouched by these histories? How is the industry so relentlessly able to abdicate responsibility for supply site entanglements? How, in short, is capitalism in its own image possible? These are the questions this book seeks to answer by focusing ethnographically on the *licit life of capitalism*. Rather than use this book to bring critical attention to the scandals that saturate capitalism's daily life, not least in the oil industry and not least in sub-Saharan Africa, I suggest that oil in Equatorial Guinea counterintuitively offers an ideal place in which to explore what we might take to be the opposite of scandal. Contracts and corporate enclaves, offshore rigs and economic theory are the assemblages of liberalism and racialized labor, expertise and technology, gender and spatialized domesticity, which seem to make an industry operating on the edge of legitimacy and legality formally legitimate, legal, and productive of extraordinary profit.¹² This approach to capitalism echoes Saidiya V. Hartman's

(1997) approach to the routinized violence of slavery, in which she focuses *not* on invocations of the shocking and the terrible, but on “those scenes in which terror can hardly be discerned” (4). This attention to the licit undertakes an anthropology of capitalism that proceeds not from a sociology of error, but from the question of how what currently exists has been stabilized (Roitman 2014, 78; see also de Goede 2005). Rather than a (mis)representation to be deconstructed, capitalism here is understood as a constant construction project to be followed through research. Each chapter—The Offshore, The Enclave, The Contract, The Subcontract, The Economy, The Political—focuses on one site where the licit is made.

What I referred to earlier as the as ifs of capitalism that so many of my interlocutors were at pains to approximate—the labor-intensive processes of abstraction and standardization, and the practices of spatial and socio-political distancing—are the conditions and ends of the licit. In the section that follows, I explore this relationship through country–company entanglements, the embodied work of disentanglement, and the forms and processes I have come to refer to as the licit life of capitalism.

ENTANGLEMENT AND DISENTANGLEMENT

The closer we look at the commodity chain, the more every step—even transportation—can be seen as an arena of cultural production . . . yet the commodity must emerge as if untouched by this friction.

—Anna Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*

The oil and gas industry seeps into every corner of Equatorial Guinea’s daily life, from keeping a regime in power to the ways in which children are educated; from staggeringly vast infrastructural projects and reconfigured modes of property adjudication to mid-ocean employment. And yet, the industry creates and inhabits an eerie distance from its supply site. How is this distance made and maintained? As Tsing’s words above suggest, the technology, labor, contracts, and imaginaries that move hydrocarbons from sub-sea to futures markets are full of the messy friction of cultural production, deeply and often illicitly entangled with lives and landscapes in Equatorial Guinea. Even so, the commodity emerges “as if untouched” by this friction. Again, how?¹³ Methodologically, this *how* asks us to start from what anthropologists have become so good at recognizing—the complex entanglements,