My study of power associations and their arts has revealed to me the impossibility of divorcing knowledge from individual people and specific contexts. I have come to see that any person’s sense of the world is intimately bound to the particular person’s distinct experiences and ways of knowing. Indeed, the power association leaders whom I have met in order to write this book—either through face-to-face exchange or through arts that certain specialists once supported and maintained—have demonstrated to me again and again that any understanding of the world is situational and personal. I imagine I will continue to refine my own assessments of myself and my work as time progresses.

Sokouraba, the rural town in western Burkina Faso where I situated myself to study power associations and their arts, reminds me in some ways of Orange, Massachusetts, the rural town in the northeastern United States where I spent my childhood. Each place is peripheral to larger centers. Sokouraba sits nearly three hundred miles southwest of Ouagadougou, the capital of present-day Burkina, and almost the same distance southeast of Bamako, the capital of present-day Mali. Orange is located nearer to bigger towns and cities, such as Amherst or Boston or New York, but it still remains distant to them. Some inhabitants of Orange and nearby towns, like some people in and around Sokouraba, regularly visit and engage with people in larger towns and cities. When I was a child, my parents and grandparents drove my siblings and me more than
thirty minutes each way to Amherst for piano lessons and shopping. My mother
and father, who grew up in Athol, the town next to Orange, studied and worked
in Boston before I was born. They later held other jobs in the city when I was in
elementary school. They also brought us to Manhattan nearly every year.

Orange and the surrounding towns supplied the world with important goods
and other necessities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Factory work-
ers in the area manufactured New Home sewing machines, Starrett precision
tools, and other industrial equipment. They also produced Minute Tapioca. In
the 1930s, four towns in the Athol-Orange area were flooded to create the Quab-
bin Reservoir, to this day a source of water for Boston, located some seventy
miles east of the reservoir. Ruins of homes abandoned for the planned flood-
ing remain visible around the reservoir, reminding area residents of a history
of unequal power relations between the big, growing city and the small, rural
towns that continue to give life to the city. Farmers in Sokouraba and elsewhere
in western Burkina Faso nourish and sustain people in distant locales within
and beyond Burkina Faso. They produce fruits and vegetables that feed people
across the country. And in the early 2000s, they contributed to the country’s
standing as a top cotton producer in the world (see fig. pref.1).

Several years ago, a colleague familiar with my hometown as well as my re-
search area mentioned that my experiences in Orange may have contributed to
the arguments I make. One of my sisters had previously said something similar
to me. But I had not yet made the same connections. I located the genesis of
my interest in the complexities of identity and their links to the arts to my un-
dergraduate research on arts labeled as Lobi in the collection of the Baltimore
Museum of Art (BMA).

After I spent a semester studying at the University of Ghana in the fall of
1998, I sought to return to my work-study job at the BMA and asked my super-
visor and then the museum’s curator of African art, Frederick John Lamp, if I
could also pursue a research-based internship. He assigned to me several objects
reportedly from Ghana in the museum’s collection to investigate. The set of ob-
jects included a Lobi figure and a Lobi stool. One of the first things I endeavored
to understand was what the term Lobi designated, and I turned to anthropolo-
gist Jack Goody’s writing on the topic. At the time, I had unknowingly internal-
ized the assumption that discrete cultural or ethnic groups, each with its own
language, religion, social organization, and arts, extended across the African
continent. When I read Goody’s claim that the term *Lobi* is not one people used for themselves but rather a term that people used to describe their neighbors, I was baffled.¹

How could a name people did not use for themselves be used to identify them and their arts? Though I had not considered this conundrum when I visited Ghana for the first time, the question motivated me to return to the country to conduct museum- and field-based research on Lobi arts. The question remained at the forefront of my mind when I began a master’s program at the University of East Anglia (UEA) several months after my ten-month research stay in Ghana ended. I carried the question with me from UEA to the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), where I enrolled in a PhD program in art history.
Conversations at UCLA with my mentors—Zoë Strother, Steven Nelson, Mary (Polly) Nooter Roberts, and Allen F. Roberts—inspired me to consider a range of possible dissertation topics on a subject other than Lobi arts. Inspired by Boureima Tiékoroni Diamitani’s 1999 dissertation in art history, I turned my attention to arts on what I call the Senufo-Mande cultural “frontier.” I continued to think about the complexities of identities as well as the ways in which we apply particular terms to the arts in our attempts to organize objects and determine meanings. With time, I have become increasingly aware of assumptions embedded in our ways of categorizing and knowing.

I have also started to see more clearly how my own experiences and ways of being in the world have influenced questions I ask and conclusions I work to advance. Almost every aspect of my own identity has resisted clear-cut categorization throughout my life. Though I have referred to Orange as my hometown, I actually feel rooted in Tully, a small settlement within the incorporated town of Orange but located closer to the center of Athol, the neighboring town and main rival in terms of school sports. While I attended public schools in Orange until I was fifteen, I swam on and felt greater allegiance to the team of the Athol Area YMCA. When I meet people and mention my hometown, I may name it as either Orange or Athol. The two towns are and are not home for me and my first family. The distinctions may seem minute to some readers, but the closer a person is to Orange or Athol, the more important the differences become.

When I was fifteen, I left the Athol-Orange area to attend Phillips Exeter Academy in Exeter, New Hampshire. I was aware each and every day that my own experiences differed from the experiences of many other students. My parents had graduated from Harvard and Tufts Universities, institutions of higher education familiar to many Exonians and their families. But unlike the parents of many of my peers, my parents committed themselves to public service and did not accumulate wealth. My ability to study at the private New England boarding school depended on financial aid, student loans, on-campus employment, and summer employment, and I attributed feeling out of place to my family’s socioeconomic status.

I vividly remember standing on the roof of an American diplomat’s house in Accra, Ghana, several years later. A man talking with me and a few other people introduced himself and told us he was based at the Harvard Graduate School of Education in Massachusetts. I mentioned that I grew up in the state. He inquired
about my hometown. Before I could finish saying Athol, the man from Harvard exclaimed, “That’s the poorest town in Massachusetts!” I was not sure if his information was correct, but his point seemed clear. How could someone from Athol, an impoverished town, end up in Accra with a Fulbright? He appeared even more perplexed when I told him that I had graduated from Phillips Exeter Academy and Johns Hopkins University. Since the exchange on the roof in Accra, I have encountered other people who have expressed similar amazement about my scholarly trajectory after I have referred to my family ties to Orange and Athol.

My sense of self and markers of my being are not limited to my hometown or my family’s lack of accumulated wealth. Other aspects of my identity that I recognize or that other people have at times ascribed to me often reveal limits, rather than demonstrating steadfastness of categories. I was born female and identify as female. Yet when I was a child, people who did not know me often referred to me as a boy. Several years ago, at the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris, a person helping me addressed me as monsieur, or mister. The slips have puzzled or amused more than upset me, and they have reminded me that at first glance or even over time, other people may perceive us in ways that differ from the ways in which we regard ourselves.

My sisters and I also grew up aware of the fact that our maternal grandmother and our paternal grandfather were the children first born in the United States to immigrants from northern and southern Italy, respectively. We were curious about our Italian heritage, but we did not have strong connections with Italian American communities or readily relate to expressions of Italian American identity. Even our Italian heritage was not unambiguous. Our maternal grandmother insisted that her family was Austrian rather than Italian because her own mother’s Italian-speaking family came from a town located in the southwesternmost corner of the Austro-Hungarian Empire until the empire’s collapse at the end of World War I. While the family actually identified as Austrian, the empire recognized the family as Italian and exiled them during the war. My sisters and I learned that others of our known ancestors traced their lineages to disparate parts of the world, including Hawaii, Ireland, and Canada. My religious identity was unstable, too. My parents grew up Catholic, married in the Catholic church in Athol, and had my sisters baptized in the same church. But by the time I was born, my parents had definitively severed ties with Catholicism and had
me baptized in a local Congregationalist-Unitarian-Universalist church. From a young age, I was aware of difficulties that come with trying to pin individuals from the same family to the same identity.

As I have reflected in recent years on my research approaches and commitments, I have started to recognize another undercurrent, namely, a long-standing tendency to question whether a particular authority is attentive to less powerful, often marginalized positions. When I began my undergraduate studies at Johns Hopkins, I thought I would major in international relations. I remember distinctly when international relations and I parted ways. My preparations for the final exam in a contemporary international politics course at the end of my third semester made clear to me that only a handful of the dozens of authors we had read in the course were women. My answer to any final exam question became clear to me before I even entered the exam room. The actual essay question asked us to explain whether it was more relevant to analyze international relations on the level of the nation-state or on the level of multinational organizations like the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank. In my response, I wrote that it did not matter how anyone sliced international relations as long as men, mostly European and Euro-American men, sitting in Washington, DC, and other big cities dominated the discourse and practice of international relations. As I saw it, the study of international relations was flawed at its core because it excluded more than half of the world’s population. The more I wrote, the more I found myself outraged by the idea that a small but powerful group of elite and homogeneous individuals by comparison with the much broader spectrum of the world’s diversity made decisions affecting the everyday lives of a large proportion of a not-always-privileged and heterogeneous global population.

I found geography a better fit and declared it as my first major. In my geography courses, we focused on local-level histories and their interconnections with the bigger world. We thought about disparities in the distribution of wealth and power, and we considered struggles of ordinary people in different places. I also found myself attracted to the study of art history and specifically African art history, thanks to my work-study job and the only course on African art history my university offered during my time there. Through the course, which I took during my second semester, I became fascinated with the idea that the study of art allows us to consider other approaches to experiencing the world and making sense of it. I later decided to declare history of art as my second major.
Because I am limited to hindsight, I may never know if my subject position, including my personal experiences of fluidity in identity, station, position, and ancestry, led me to find appeal in the question about what Lobi means as well as what it reveals or distorts about individual people and arts. Nevertheless, here I attempt to account for my own subject position and the ways in which I see the world. In this book and other related projects, I am first and foremost concerned with how we know what we know, how our assumptions may not be quite right, and how no person can ever divorce herself from her own subject position in her study of anything. I investigate categories other people have variously constructed to organize knowledge, and I propose other approaches. I aim for methods that better account for the complexities of individual peoples’ actual lived experiences and identities, rather than pigeonholing any single person or thing into one category or another.

My perceptions of fluidity in identity and of the importance and validity of considering the singular perspectives and experiences of individuals who have been marginalized, along with a strong sense of commitment to pursuits of justice and accuracy, have continued to fuel my research up to the present (fig. pref.2). In my first book, *Senufo Unbound: Dynamics of Art and Identity in West Africa* (2014), I attempt to answer questions that emerged when I first started my research on the Lobi stool and Lobi figure in the BMA’s collection. However, I focus on the term *Senufo* instead of the term *Lobi*. I situate the term *Senufo* within particular historical contexts, tracing it from its earliest appearances in French publications at the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century. I investigate application of the term to a corpus of arts circulating in Europe and North America in the early twentieth century, and I assess assumptions embedded in the term throughout the twentieth century. I conclude that the term *Senufo* may not provide the analytic potential that African art enthusiasts have seemed to think it might. I further demonstrate potential in other framings, ones that do not insist on grounding analysis of the arts in terms of discrete cultural or ethnic groups.

This book—*Seeing the Unseen: Arts of Power Associations on the Senufo-Mande Cultural “Frontier”*—extends the conclusion of *Senufo Unbound* to show what we can learn when we abandon the common practice of analyzing so-called historical or classical arts of Africa as expressions of particular cultural or ethnic groups. I also reflect on various methods for gathering and analyzing
discontinuous data about phenomena that span time and space. My aim is to focus attention on the local specificity and inherent subjectivity involved in the production and circulation of knowledge about anything.

My third, in-progress monographic project, *Mapping Senufo*, relates to and expands on my first two projects. *Mapping Senufo* is a collaborative, born-digital publication endeavor that I initiated and now codirect with Constantine Petridis, currently curator of African art at the Art Institute of Chicago. The larger project team is working to reassemble fragmentary information that has contributed to disparate understandings of Senufo arts and identities for more than a century. We seek to make the subjectivity of knowledge production central to the publication’s interactive design. Our goal is to highlight each reader’s role in shaping that person’s own understandings. With this approach, we seek to counter the idea of a single, authoritative account and instead make evident the contingency of any knowledge.
