The Licit Life of Capitalism

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The Licit Life of Capitalism: US Oil in Equatorial Guinea. 

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The helicopter touched down gingerly on the rig, and João, the rig’s safety coordinator, immediately whisked me to the radio room for a safety training mini-course on video. After administering an exam that tested my comprehension, João had me sign a liability waiver and then put me in my required personal protective equipment (PPE) of hardhat, safety glasses, gloves, earplugs, coveralls, and steel toe boots. A gregarious Brazilian capoeirista and vegetarian in his late forties, João had been in the offshore oil and gas business for twenty-eight years, and had been on this particular drilling rig—which I’ll call the FIPCO 330—through a series of contracts that had taken him and the rig from the Irish Sea to Turkey, then Angola, the Congo, Gabon, Cameroon, and Nigeria, and now to Equatorial Guinea. Built in 1973 in a Texas shipyard, and owned by offshore drilling contractor SeaTrekker, the FIPCO 330, and many of the men on board, moved around the world from contract to contract under the Liberian flag, a mobile technosocial assemblage at work today in Equatorial Guinea’s offshore waters as they were in Turkey’s, and as they will be in Ghana’s. Operating companies—the Exxon-Mobils, Chevrons, and BPs of the world—contract with offshore drilling contractors, including SeaTrekker, for the FIPCO and rigs like it, paying up to $1 million per day for offshore rig rental. With many of the workers like
João already on board, contracted rigs move into position to begin the grueling twenty-four-hour workdays that will eventually bring hydrocarbons to the surface.

On this particular March day, there were 115 men working on board the rig. They came from twenty different nations: Australia, Brazil, Britain, Cameroon, Canada, Colombia, Croatia, Equatorial Guinea, France, India, Nigeria, Norway, the Philippines, Romania, Russia, Serbia, South Africa, Ukraine, the United States, and Venezuela. Among the workers on board, only four worked directly for the operating company, which I will call Smith, and only twenty-five worked directly for SeaTrekker. The remaining eighty-six men were hired from fifteen different subcontracting companies, which provided everything from directional drilling experts to on-board cooks, radio operators to mud engineers. In total, there were seventeen different companies at work on the rig.

The iconic image of a “lone oil rig floating in an endless sea, [seemingly] detached from any sociohistorical or political-economic referent” (Sawyer 2012, 710) asks us to picture petroleum production as a feat defined exclusively by technological prowess and evermore sophisticated engineering.
But João and his fellow rig workers, together with the complex contracting and subcontracting arrangements that organize both their transnational working lives and the intricacy of the corporate form itself, begin to indicate some of the effort required to make that iconic view from the helicopter possible. In this chapter, through an ethnographic account of the FIPCO 330—as infrastructure, as worksite, as node in a vast corporate archipelago, and as a repository of capitalist desire, fantasy, racialized inequality, and tension—I trace the work that allows Equatorial Guinea to recede into the distance. I trace the work required to define this production process—subsea hydrocarbon deposit, to rig, to Floating Production, Storage, and Offloading (FPSO) vessel, to tanker, to market—as “offshore.”

While the rig visit that frames this chapter was merely twelve hours long, the broader question of “the offshore” was ubiquitous in my fieldwork, the great majority of which was on land. That Equatorial Guinea’s entire industry can be described as “offshore,” despite the expansive terrestrial investments and transformations the oil and gas industry brings in its train, speaks to the flexibility and productivity of the category. Specifically, on the FIPCO 330, in both Equatorial Guinea and in the global oil and gas industry more widely, there is a capacious overlap between petroleum’s industrial offshore and its financial offshore. Rather than imagining the financial offshore as “a significant spatial metaphor” in economic globalization, and the petroleum offshore, in contrast, as “historically embedded within socially defined space” (Zalik 2009, 558), ethnographic attention to the FIPCO shows that the financial and industrial offshores are imbricated zones of fantasy and techniques of profit generation, both of them productive metaphors and historically embedded social phenomena.

Offshore oil operations have in common with offshore financial setups the idea (the desire, the design, the intention) that there are spaces where the production of profit can evade or minimize contestation and oversight. Just as offshore financial arrangements are designed to minimize regulation, taxation, and accessibility, 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 infrastructure. Indeed, one of the themes of this chapter is the extent to which offshore infrastructure carries far more than the crude, seawater, or liquid natural gas for which it is, at least in part, designed. To the extent that infrastructures can participate in the materialization of certain political goals and fantasies, this chapter asks: What social and political
worlds are made when oil is drawn out of the earth from a depth of 35,000 feet? What are the effects of the offshore as a capacious category? I suggest that it is, in part, the overlap between the industrial and financial offshores that makes the view from the helicopter possible, that makes it seem as if Equatorial Guinea has disappeared.

The first section of this chapter briefly locates the FIPCO in the archipelagic corporate form of transnational oil and gas companies, before turning in the second section to the shared history of the industrial and financial offshores to animate the ethnographic material that follows: infrastructure, capitalist desire and fantasy, labor, race, and the habitation of the industrial and financial offshores for Equatoguinean rig workers. In each of the chapter’s sections, the offshore yields questions about responsibility and sovereignty. In a geographic and legal space where attenuation of liability is part of the project, who is responsible for offshore lives and outcomes? Workers’ lives? Environmental outcomes? What is the relationship between the Equatoguinean state and US-based oil companies offshore? How is power exercised and abdicated here and to what effect? How is it that practices that are increasingly untenable onshore—organizing and paying labor differently according to race—are given new licitness offshore?

Finally, in each section I try to hold the productive simultaneity of capitalism in tension—contingent and obdurate; full of gaps, yet spectacularly performative. Thus, on the one hand, the chapter engages the familiar anthropological approach of using ethnographic intimacy to show how an ostensibly frictionless space like the offshore is, in fact, a teeming and tense social world. On the other hand, while insisting on the centrality of that approach, I also insist on a key shortcoming: that it can leave us without the tools to understand the persistence and performativity of the offshore itself. In Nigeria alone, more oil seeps out of scantily regulated offshore platforms every year than escaped in the entire Deepwater Horizon catastrophe. And, more than $140 billion per year leaves Africa for tax havens and offshore financial centers or via transfer pricing, which is close to four times the annual amount of development aid to the continent (Bond and Sharife 2009). In other words, we have to take seriously the simultaneity of the offshore’s teeming sociality and its felicitous performativity. The point, then, is not to expose the offshore as mere metaphor or misconception, but to show how that metaphor is made and maintained, and importantly, made real through its consequential effects in the world.
The company that owns the FIPCO 330 is incorporated in Switzerland, with additional headquarters in Houston, Texas, and the Cayman Islands. The vessel itself is registered and sails under the Liberian flag, ostensibly operating under Liberian law. In Liberia (as well as in Panama and the Marshall Islands, among others), flags of convenience (FOCs), or “open registries,” generate significant state revenue by offering vessels protection from income taxes, labor demands, and other regulations, often advertised as “nonbureaucratic” or more “efficient” maritime administration. Today, over two-thirds of vessels in the shipping industry worldwide sail under open registries. Now ubiquitous, the practice has its origins in the oil industry. As Standard Oil boomed in the 1930s, Esso—Standard’s shipping subsidiary—transferred twenty-five ships to Panama’s fledgling registry. The colonial geographies of global capitalism’s “offshore” are immediately apparent here. Panama, Liberia, and the Marshall Islands become more “efficient” sites of maritime administration not because of their strategic insertion in a market of equals (as “comparative advantage” might suggest) but because of their subordinated entanglements in ongoing relations of dispossession and coloniality. In other words, what Stoler (2008) has called imperial debris—in this case, national juridical systems that are broadly permissive toward corporate interests offshore—is the terrain on which comparative advantage is made.

Opening out from the FIPCO to the operating company that contracts it—itself a limited liability local subsidiary of a parent corporation we too simply refer to as “an oil company”—and out still further to the diffuse geographies of the parent corporation itself, we begin to get a sense of the intimate interconnections between financial offshore practices, including tax havens and transfer pricing, and industrial offshore practices that move the FIPCO, João, and his coworkers from Equatorial Guinea to the Congo. It was through conversations with Donald that I came to understand the centrality of corporate geographies to the daily life of US oil companies “in” Equatorial Guinea.

By the time I came to know Donald in 2007, he had been in the oil and gas industry for twenty-eight years. In his twenties, he moved with his wife Cheryl from Utah to Houston to work in the industry and raise their children. Over years of work in Texas, Donald climbed through the management ranks, the kids grew up, and eventually he and Cheryl began the peripatetic lifestyle of so many of the migrant managerial industry workers I came to know in Equatorial Guinea. Together, Cheryl and Donald had lived and
worked in the transnational oil industry in Russia for five years, Ireland for two years, Japan for one year, and Indonesia for six months. When I asked him, “Where’s home?” Donald replied, “Equatorial Guinea, but my tax residency is in Houston.”

Donald and Cheryl were thoughtful and kind interlocutors in the field, a generosity openly informed by their devout Christianity. Cheryl had only recently joined Donald in Malabo, and she readily admitted to feeling isolated living in the company’s compound, yet uncomfortable beyond its walls. In order to grow more comfortable in her new surroundings (as she had eventually in Russia, Japan, and Ireland), Cheryl would occasionally accompany me in out in the city—to the market, to pay my electricity bill, to eat lunch. She would ask me about my life in Malabo, and I would ask her about life as a nomadic manager’s spouse in Equatorial Guinea and beyond. Donald and Cheryl invited me for meals in their home on the Endurance compound, and they were perhaps the only two migrant oil personnel who saw the inside of my Malabo apartment. Over my fourteen months in Equatorial Guinea, Donald graciously hosted me for hours of interviewing in his office; invited me to accompany him on various facilities-related work excursions; and shared otherwise unattainable information, including lists of Equatoguinean laws relevant to the petroleum sector (compiled by the company’s legal team) and insight into the corporate structure of his company, which I will call Endurance. In my effort to make sense of our long conversations, I initially sketched a conventional organogram relating the parts of the Endurance Corporation hierarchically to each other.

In figure 1.2, the aesthetics of legible hierarchy and alignment suggest a clear relationship between corporate subsidiaries in Equatorial Guinea (at the bottom) and the “parent” corporation (at the top), and by extension, clear paths of responsibility and redress. But as I paid closer to attention to my interview notes with Donald and continued pressing him on the corporate form over fourteen months, and as I worked more closely with Equatoguinean rig workers (discussed later in the chapter), I began to understand the intended effects of this kind of corporate archipelago. Thus, it became analytically important to subvert the organogram. Dizzying, densely layered, and circuitous, figure 1.3, and the description below, more accurately depict the attenuation and convolution of responsibility and liability offshore.

The headquarters of Endurance Equatorial Guinea Production Limited (EEGPL) sits on an isthmus of Bioko Island. A subsidiary of the US-based Endurance Corporation, EEGPL is a petroleum producer that shares this isthmus with two other companies: one producing methanol and one liquid
natural gas. These three companies are managed as separate businesses, but the Endurance Corporation is the largest among a consortium of investors in all three, and it acts as the operator. Leaving Bioko Island and moving into Endurance’s archipelagic corporate geography, we come first to Japan, where we find the consortium of companies that funds the liquid natural gas project in Equatorial Guinea. From there we move to the Cayman Islands, where Endurance International Petroleum is only one of over two hundred registered Endurance corporate subsidiaries. From there we move through eight other subsidiary levels of the company until we get to Endurance Oil, headquarterered in Houston, and Endurance Petroleum, headquarterered in Findley, Ohio, both publicly traded, with shareholders unevenly distributed around the world.

*Endurance actually owns EEGPL 100% — operates on behalf of investment partners, hence percentage divisions

**Figure 1.2.** Conventional organogram of the Endurance Corporation.
Figure 1.3. Corporate Archipelago I: Corporate Form. *Op* indicates *operating company*, *Sub* indicates *subcontractor*, and *Cont* indicates *direct contractual relationships*. 
As Donald explained it to me, “Most of these structures are set up for tax ‘planning’ and liability.” Donald used his fingers in an exaggerated quote/unquote gesture around the word “planning,” implying quite plainly that planning was a euphemism for legal tax evasion. “This arrangement shields our parent company from liability,” Donald continued. The finance manager of a separate company told me a similar story: “The Company consists of numerous business units divided geographically. This is [the] Africa Unit. Our Equatorial Guinea operation is set up in the Cayman Islands for tax advantages. [Other locations in the Africa unit, including] Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Ghana—each has separate tax laws. Africa is one business unit but the tax regimes are different.” And still a third manager from a third company explained: “Here in Equatorial Guinea we are a separate company, Regal Energy Equatorial Guinea LTD, a Cayman Island–incorporated company, and a wholly owned subsidiary of Regal Energy Inc. In every country we go into, we set up a second account. There are advantages to keeping the revenues outside the US if you have operations outside the US.” The corporate geographies Donald and other managers describe here, including parent companies; multiple subsidiaries; separate headquarters, operations, and finance locations; and consortia investment—all separated by various levels of juridical independence—are practices of risk mitigation and liability dispersal. They allow corporations to enjoy tax loopholes in a variety of jurisdictions; facilitate practices of transfer pricing; and spread the “corporeality” of corporate personhood into a dispersed and legally slippery archipelago (Maurer 2008).

Note, however, that the corporate archipelago in figure 1.3, by itself, cannot make Equatorial Guinea’s subsea hydrocarbon deposits into either shareholder value or gas in your tank. Instead, this arrangement relies on an overlaid series of proliferating corporate forms called “body shops”—the industry term for labor brokers detailed in chapter 4—which are paid handsomely to bring mostly men, mostly from the Philippines, into Equatorial Guinea, as well as workers like those I introduced at the beginning of this chapter from across the world’s oil diaspora: Ecuador and Scotland, Kazakhstan and the US Gulf States. Body shops are also publicly traded companies working to provide value to disperse shareholders. As I go on to detail in this chapter, the laborers they bring to Equatorial Guinea work rotating shifts on mobile offshore infrastructures that are themselves subcontracted from major oil service firms. These firms—Halliburton, Bechtel, Schlumberger—are also among the world’s largest and most profitable publicly traded companies. Notice that this overlaid corporate geography rigorously reins in not only tax
Figure 1.4. Corporate Archipelago II: Subcontracts and Labor.
liability, but also local investment in Equatorial Guinea, with payroll, banking, insurance, labor, transport, technical inputs, and other industry-related services all based elsewhere.

I want to emphasize here that Donald and I worked together on this account of his company’s corporate form. In other words, these forms of liability dispersal are neither secret nor illicit, but open strategies for profit maximization, risk management, and the attenuation or spreading of liability for everything from offshore platform pollution to labor contestation. While Donald expressed ambivalence about tax “planning,” at least acknowledging via gesture that the practice is contested or, for some, unethical, this collaborative sketch of Endurance’s corporate form “in” Equatorial Guinea offers a clear look at the licit life of capitalism as legally sanctioned, widely replicated, contested, and yet, ordinary. The open, licit character of these risk-dispersal and profit-maximization practices is precisely what this book draws attention to: the legal, repeating, and flexible ways in which the oil and gas industry sets up in supply sites, and the grounded effects of these arrangements—strategic sovereignty, attenuation of liability, and profit relentlessly escaping both taxation in the United States and investment in Equatorial Guinea.

People in and close to the industry in Equatorial Guinea naturalized the effects of these arrangements, narrativized them and made sense of them, through ideas about the offshore, and offshore infrastructure in particular. Offshore rigs like the FIPCO 330 are industrial atolls in this vast corporate archipelago, and many of their sociotechnical qualities—mobility, technical complexity, transience, and the (in)visibility of their mid-ocean operations to onshore populations—amplify the promises of the offshore corporate form. To illustrate, when I wrote João to schedule the follow-up overnight visit he and I had discussed during my initial rig sojourn, he responded with the following email: “Surprise! We no longer work with Smith but with another client named ‘Regal Energy.’ Regal Energy also has an office in Malabo as we are nearby Malabo now... You have to rush as we will soon leave to Congo... Around the beginning of August.” Within three months, this rig had not only switched operating companies (and consequently, locations at sea), but had also received sailing orders for the Congo, with João and others in tow. The fitful and unpredictable temporalities, contract relationships, and geographies indicated in João’s email make even these massive infrastructures—some of the largest mobile infrastructures in the world—seem fleeting and spectral. This apparent ephemerality of massive infrastructures further adds to the slipperiness of the corporate form offshore. The next section attempts to think through the offshore theoretically as a capacious metaphor, practice,
and historical spatialization, before turning back to ethnographic material on offshore infrastructure and those who manage and labor on it.

The Offshore

There is a historical and structural relation between concepts of the free sea, free trade, free world economy, and those of free competition and free exploitation.

—Carl Schmitt and G. L. Ulmen, The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum

The offshore is a broad category “that consists of all sorts of sovereign spaces essentially defined by their relative lack of regulation and taxation compared to nation states” (Cameron and Palan 2004, 91). Think tax havens, export processing zones, or special economic zones. To be offshore, in other words, is to be outside of a set of relations that do not necessarily correspond to literal shores, including regulation, taxation, “inefficiencies,” and even conventional conceptions of citizenship. Many offshore arrangements offer different rules for residents and nonresidents, a disaggregated, pay-for-the-privileges-you-want and the-strictures-you-don’t citizenship. Maurer (2008) summarizes this quality of offshore designations as “the disaggregation or unbundling of citizenship, jurisdiction, and nationality” (158). (See also Picciotto and Haines 1999; Ong 2006.) Offshore rigs are no exception in this regard. Working under flags of convenience, like the FIPCO’s Liberian flag, which facilitate the most permissive shipping and labor standards, the subcontracting arrangements that proliferate in offshore oil effectively deregulate everything from labor guidelines, to environmental assessment, to the provision of security. This is true not only in Equatorial Guinea, but in offshore oil arrangements around the world. Referring to the outer continental shelf of the US Gulf of Mexico, where oversight and regulation were “streamlined” to accelerate exploration in the wake of the 1970s oil crisis, legal scholar Meg Caldwell, geophysicist Mark Zoback, and energy engineer Roland Horne together refer to the Gulf as “the sacrifice zone” (Caldwell et al. 2010). Zalik (2009) has also written that Mexico’s offshore is “environmentally deregulated” (293) insofar as restrictions on maritime movement around platforms render spills and other practices largely invisible (see also Reed 2009; Woolfson et al. 1996; Kashi and Watts 2008; Bond 2011, 2013).

In his introduction to The Offshore World, Palan (2006) suggests that de-
spite its evocative reputation for placeless economic interaction, the financial offshore is in fact deeply terrestrial. “Offshore evokes images of the high seas and exotic locations. But often this is not the case: offshore economic activity does not take place in some barge floating in the middle of the ocean” (2). Rather, financial transactions originate or pass through London, New York, or Tokyo; offshore manufacturing, including *maquiladoras* or export processing zones, are to be found in enclaves of developing countries; and tax havens have a geographic presence in Cyprus, Luxembourg, or the Cayman Islands. In each case, *shores*, or territorial sovereignty, is indeed central to the making of offshore spaces. “Offshore is sustained by the very principles of sovereignty that it is claimed to have undermined: export processing zones are territorial enclaves produced by the state; tax havens are taking advantage of the right to write law and grant legal title” (Palan 2006, 102).

Offshore, in other words, relies on sovereignty to abdicate sovereignty; sovereign states make political choices to revoke regulatory oversight in specific portions of their territory. But in considering offshores (and finance more broadly) in the Caribbean (Maurer 2008, 2010, 2013; Hudson 2017a) or Africa, where histories of colonialism and underdevelopment are everywhere on the surface, we have to think about sovereignty differently, as something closer to what Cattelino (2008) has called “sovereign interdependency.” Small island economies in the Caribbean, for instance, become tax havens in a process entangled with histories of imperialism, colonialism, and slavery, the aftermath of which makes them more attractive/vulnerable repositories for fleeing capital. As with flags of convenience in Panama, Liberia, and the Marshall Islands, the long wake of colonialism is a more apt description of tax haven status than is participation in a market of equals (Maurer 2008). So too in Equatorial Guinea, where state prerogatives to give US companies free rein on platforms are less about sovereign power and more about imperial debris, histories of colonialism, and profound inequality in the global economy.

The petroleum offshore is particularly generative for thinking about sovereignty because it pushes the offshore into arguably its most literal instantiation. In the petroleum offshore, economic activity *does* take place, at least in part, “on some barge floating in the middle of the ocean” (Palan 2003, 2). The FIPCO 330, along with the FPSO and the tankers that transport oil to market, are all (broadly speaking) barges floating in the middle of the ocean in which offshore economic activity—though not the kind Palan has in mind—takes place. In the oil and gas industry in particular, linking the industrial and financial offshores focuses our attention on the
centrality and proliferation of multiple offshores as intertwined techniques for the promises and seductions of capitalism, including the production of profit and the abdication of responsibility across the unequal geographies of the postcolonial world. Tax havens, transfer pricing, and flags of convenience are central to quotidian spectacular accumulation in the oil industry, as is the lack of external regulation and oversight on offshore platforms and throughout the hydrocarbon commodity chain. The commodity chain moves alongside another set of practices in which oil companies hedge the risks of notoriously volatile oil prices by investing in oil futures markets (themselves scantly regulated), which then become central not only to the price of gas or the outcome of pension fund investments, but also to the funding required for the industry’s ever-deeper-water explorations (Guyer 2009; Sawyer 2012; Johnson 2015). In other words, petroleum’s industrial offshore and various financial offshores are intimately intertwined in everyday practice, a relationship with a specific juridical history in the Law of the Sea.

Both the financial and industrial offshores find juridical identity in an ongoing legal conversation around the Law of the Sea, a body of laws governing the relationships among sovereignty, land, and oceans, which has evolved from fourteenth-century jurists through the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. Due to the historical need to defend territory against naval threats, the legal boundaries of a state had to extend beyond strict territorial boundaries into the surrounding seas, as did political authority (Hampton and Abbott 1999). The resulting discontinuity between physical shores and legal sovereignty opened the door for juridical spaces defined in other than territorial terms—spaces still organized by state sovereignty, but subject to different sets of regulations. Borrowing from Prescott (1975), Palan (2006) writes that “the earliest legal provisions for coastal waters involved the distribution of favors by rulers, such as exclusive rights to shallow fishing grounds and salt deposits in tidal marshes, exemption from port or harbor dues, and unhindered transit through straits” (23; emphasis added). The offshore in Equatorial Guinea and elsewhere is a contemporary site of Prescott’s “distribution of favors by rulers.” Sovereignty is both intentionally and inevitably stretched thin offshore, allowing for exemptions and “unhindered transits” of all kinds. In Equatorial Guinea, foreign oil companies do not pay import duties; they are permitted to set up proprietary ports of entry; and “industry standards,” rather than Equatoguinean law, exercise quotidian governing power over daily life on the rigs.

According to the Law of the Sea, states have domain over minerals and
other resources within their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) up to two hundred nautical miles off their shores (see figure 1.6). The first paragraph of Equatorial Guinea’s hydrocarbon law, translated from Spanish, makes direct reference to their EEZ: “The fundamental Law of the Republic of Equatorial Guinea consecrates and designates as the property of the people of Equatorial Guinea all resources found in our national territory, including the subsoil, continental shelf, islands, and the Exclusive Economic Zone of our seas” (República de Guinea Ecuatorial 2006a, 1) Because offshore oil platforms are still technologically limited to the continental shelf, they remain within the physical boundaries of the Equatoguinean state. However, the daily life of regulation and its absence on platforms, explored here and again in chapter 4, introduce a series of issues around state and corporate sovereignty offshore where, in practice, sovereignty is distributed and (often strategically) fluid between the state and the innumerable contractors and subcontractors that we see on the FIPCO. The Equatoguinean state and foreign companies use and struggle over sovereignty strategically. It is not something that one or the other has or has lost in any straightforward way. By willfully signing contracts that compartmentalize their territory, the Equatoguinean government is given the opportunity “to support unfettered capitalism while denouncing it: to bemoan their loss of power and sovereignty while contributing to that very loss” (Palan 2006, 190). Oil companies manipulate the concept too, “happy to invoke national sovereignty when pressures are placed on them to improve their human rights or social responsibility records; and yet only too happy to operate in an environment in which they could get away with just about anything” (Kashi and Watts 2008, 46).

The archipelagic corporate form I discussed earlier facilitates the slipperness of corporate sovereignty offshore. This disaggregation or dispersion is, in effect, the legal (licit, intentional) thinning of liability, accountability, and responsibility, such that what seems clearly to be the singular exercise of corporate power—global companies in contract with governments around the world, maneuvering the world’s largest mobile infrastructures and reaping spectacular profit—in practice fractures rapidly into a legally slippery tangle of subsidiaries and consortia and subcontractors. The next section tries to arrest some of that slipperness and materialize offshore infrastructure by asking the questions: What is it? What does it do? What do managers and Equatoguinean government personnel imagine it to be doing? I pay special attention to the forms of desire and fantasy offshore infrastructures produce, and the kinds of distancing effects they enable.
Figure 1.5. Exclusive Economic Zone (2).
Figure 1.6. Exclusive Economic Zone (1). Note how in this concession map, Bioko is visually swallowed by “the offshore.”
Infrastructure exerts a force—not simply in the materials and energies it avails, but also the way it attracts people, draws them in, coalesces and expends their capacities. Thus, the distinction between infrastructure and sociality is fluid and pragmatic rather than definitive. People work on things to work on each other, as these things work on them.

— AbdouMaliq Simone, “Infrastructure: Introductory Commentary by AbdouMaliq Simone”

Offshore infrastructure in Equatorial Guinea’s waters includes drilling rigs, platforms, and FPSO vessels. Rigs are used for drilling, completion, and production; platforms are put to use postcompletion to process oil and gas and prepare them for export. Essentially offshore plants, platforms are among the largest movable, human-made infrastructures in the world. A typical platform may have up to thirty wellheads, with directional drilling allowing subsea reservoirs to be accessed at different depths and remote positions up to five miles off of the platform (Conaway 1999). Once reservoirs have been accessed and drilled and the oil is brought to the surface, the FPSOs store the crude until it is offloaded onto tankers for transport to market. While they vary in size, FPSOs have tremendous technical capacities: they are able to process up to 80,000 barrels of oil per day, reinjecting 150,000 barrels per day of seawater, handling 170 million cubic feet of gas, and storing 1.6 million barrels of crude and condensate.

While each platform is commissioned and built by individual operating companies, designed to last the lifetime of the field (after which they will undergo some combination of disassembly, repurposing, and intentional sinking), rigs like the FIPCO and FPSOs are rented and are moved around the world from contract to contract. During my fieldwork, with oil prices at or above $150 per barrel, rigs were in high demand worldwide, and operating companies at work in Equatorial Guinea were waiting up to three years for a drilling rig to move into position. While the FIPCO was built in a Texas shipyard, many newer rigs are built in Korea, purchased by an offshore drilling contractor like SeaTrekker, subcontracted by SeaTrekker to operating companies to drill offshore, and then floated from Korea to wherever the contract happens to be. On the FIPCO, I was told repeatedly how archaic the facility was, including the redolent explanation that Africa, after all, is where rigs go to die.
As Simone (2012) intimates in this section’s opening epigraph, the relationship between these infrastructures and the people who animate them is fluid and mutually productive. People work on things to work on each other. Here, I pay particular attention to the forms of desire and fantasy, inequality and segregation that these infrastructures facilitate, both for those who manage them and for those who work on them. Infrastructures, Brian Larkin (2013) writes, “emerge out of and store within them forms of desire and fantasy and can take on fetish-like aspects that sometimes can be wholly autonomous from their technical function (329). . . . The sense of fascination they stimulate is an important part of their political effect” (334). Indeed, offshore petroleum infrastructures are multivalent sociopolitical projects—not merely a response to geologic fact, but a choice about visibility, accessibility, and political risk. To illustrate: On both the continental and island landmasses of Equatorial Guinea, liquid hydrocarbons seep to the surface. Locals note the seeps. Migrant geologists working for US companies know about them as well, and yet there is no onshore exploration in Equatorial Guinea. Why? Because the industry’s cost-benefit analyses of prospective infrastructure projects consider not only the quality of crude, the distance to market, and the anticipated cost of extraction, but also, centrally, the perceived risk. As one geologist working in Equatorial Guinea explained to me, “An onshore well in Algeria costs $3 million. Offshore here wells are from $15 to $80 million. If you do find a large onshore reservoir, it’s very economic, but there are associated political risks. If this country were to go through a civil war, our structures out in the water are safe. But look at Nigeria; nothing’s to stop people from coming onto your facility, stopping production, blowing up the facility.” The geologist articulates a particular form of capitalist desire common to both the industrial and financial offshores—a space where “associated political risks,” whether taxation or militant resistance, attenuate.

Infrastructure, in other words, is envisioned, built, and operated to solve political problems simultaneous and even paramount to its material capacities—politics by other means (Mitchell 2011). Part of infrastructure’s affective power emanates from the enfolding of political projects into concrete, steel, copper wire, and asphalt. But lest we take this as an insight of critical theory, somehow a radical rejoinder to naturalized assumptions about infrastructure, industry managers and Equatoguinean state functionaries with whom I worked openly discussed offshore infrastructure as a means of (hoped-for) control.
Management

Offshore facilities promise distance from political entanglements, community entitlements, visible pollution in inhabited areas, and militant attacks and bunkering focused on accessible pipelines. That much of the commodity chain can take place in the middle of the ocean, from exploration to processing to exporting, seems to at least partially remove oil and gas companies from the ugliest, most visible, and most publicized negative effects of their industry. My discussions with migrant managers and Equatoguinean government appointees often substantiated these ideas of offshore disentanglement. Consider the comments of Mauricio, a recently appointed Equatoguinean government official:

Onshore/offshore is an operation question. Socially there is more positive than negative to it. An oil infrastructure has a lot of environmental problems. When you build that onshore next to a community, there is more potential for problems for that community. Environmentally, the safest way to have an oil facility is to have it removed from social settings. It’s an advantage for offshore operations. Having an onshore operation involves a lot of piping, infrastructure, that for some people may not be beautiful architecturally. It may not be impressive for environmentalists and people who care for trees.

While Mauricio starts his reflection by suggesting that the difference between onshore and offshore is an operations issue—merely a spatial question about where the work of exploration and extraction gets done—he segues immediately into social and environmental visibility and impact concerns. He suggests that, at the community level, the visible infrastructure of onshore production is aesthetically disruptive (as it may not be beautiful or architecturally impressive). But he also acknowledges that aesthetic objections are related to environmental objections; since “an oil infrastructure has a lot of environmental problems,” whether it is onshore or off, it’s best to get those problems away from people.

In addition to noting community-level environmental problems, this government appointee flags a set of supra-local issues, including regulation and visibility. Often when “environmentalists and those who care for trees” are not “impressed” by what they see (and the ability to see onshore infrastructure is a crucial difference), there is a call for action or regulation. By removing the visuals of oil infrastructure and operations to the middle of the ocean, there is a noticeable attenuation of public and government attention, facilitating unimpeded production. Eugenio, one of the few Equatoguinean
petroleum engineers working in-country, explained the on-platform results of this attenuation:

Normally, in the United States for example, the more petroleum you extract, the harder it is to clean the water. In other sites the amount [of oil] taken is conditional on water quality. Here there is not this conditionality. Here there is no outside testing. On the platform from time to time people are told to prepare for an environmental assessment, but it’s always someone from within the company, and the results are always good.

Both Mauricio and Eugenio are overtly concerned with the environmental impact of offshore production, claiming either that this impact is minimized when infrastructure is moved away from communities or that it is only regulation and assessment that are minimized. Both men, however, framed their understandings of the offshore with concern for local outcomes, whether pollution or community protection from the petro-project.

Migrant managers, on the other hand, voiced markedly different concerns when discussing the advantages of offshore infrastructure. They focused not on threats to Equatoguinean environments and communities, but on the threats those communities posed to their operations. Here, three different managers (two from the US and one British) offer remarkably consonant offshore aspirations:

Offshore makes it easier. Reduces investment risk. . . . You’re not exposed—you’re shielded from the masses, shielded from interaction. You can control the interaction. You can contain the asset, it’s a clean containment. If a boat drifts in our area, we call the Navy. There’s a lot less opportunity for negative interaction and distraction. In Nigeria people steal oil. We don’t have that. It’s clean. Less leakage, shrinkage. Controls are tight.

It’s expensive offshore, but it’s clean. No laying pipelines through jungles, uprooting villages. There’s nobody out there. We lay pipelines in the seabed, and it doesn’t bother anyone.

Offshore has made it easier. You’re on an island, if you know what I’m saying. Diamond mines in Angola are an absolute nightmare. Armies get to you. Pirates get to you. [You have to] have massive South African war vets to secure the places. When you’re out there on an oil rig, you’ve got a huge moat around you. That has made it easier. It’s more expensive to get the oil out of the ground, but you don’t have to worry about onshore issues, which are massive expenses.
These managers make a series of claims about the control and containment facilitated by the offshore—of potentially volatile sociopolitical situations (note the comparisons with Nigerian oil and Angolan diamond mining), of profit margins (less “leakage” and “shrinkage”). The offshore setup at least forestalls the risks attached to visible spills and to attack by armies, by oil bunkerers, and by MEND, who was often rumored to be planning an attack on neighboring Equatorial Guinea installations. Avoided too in the offshore setup are the unpleasant tasks of relocating entire villages and negotiating the attendant set of community claims that come with visible onshore extraction—for employment, reparations, and development projects—or of hiring “massive South African war vets” to secure onshore installations. Again, the idealized industrial offshore these managers describe coincides with the evocative promises of the financial offshore, sites “of disinterested and placeless economic interaction” (Cameron and Palan 2004, 105). In avoiding the risks people bring, these managers envision the offshore setup as reducing contestation, even if it cannot be avoided completely.

It is interesting to wonder to what extent these managers’ fantasies of the offshore are multifaceted. They clearly hope for a controllable environment in which to make a profit. But do they also hope, from within an industry infamous for disastrous environmental and community consequences, for different environmental and social outcomes? Is there, in these statements, either an acknowledgment or a desire to resolve what one might call the contradictions of capitalism? In the field, I was stunned again and again by the extent to which US and British management failed to acknowledge the imbrication of their industry with the environmental, social, and political problems by which we were all surrounded. They loved to talk about these problems—how corrupt Equatorial Guinea is; how it’s so hard to see so much wealth next to so much poverty; how much litter there is. But, as with the Canadian human resources (HR) manager, or the corporate social responsibility (CSR) manager touting environmental education, there was a near total disconnect between the deep imbrication of their industry and the daily lives they critiqued. While Venezuelan, Brazilian, and Nigerian oil workers in Equatorial Guinea often talked about the industry as a historically problematic endeavor in which they were choosing to participate, the most highly placed workers (nearly always from the US or the UK) rarely acknowledged the widely criticized effects of their industry.

Rather than a hoped-for reconciliation of capitalism’s contradictions, what I heard repeatedly from managers was more akin to haunting. The accessibility of infrastructure in other places and times across hydrocarbon
history haunted their descriptions of the offshore in Equatorial Guinea. Nigeria repeatedly oozed to the surface in my informants’ collective memories (both personal stories and anecdotal accounts of industry history), as did histories of uprooting villages in Latin America and laying pipelines through inhabited forests in Indonesia, as well as resistance to those actions. Indeed, from Saudi Arabia to Mexico, early oil work was typified by foreign companies bringing in massive onshore infrastructures, what William Reno (2001) has called “BYOI” or “Bring Your Own Infrastructure,” for extraction, production, and export. Local labor at these sites, brought in initially as construction workers, cooks, and technical trainees, lived in tents, cheek by jowl with American and European workers in the most comfortable enclaved conditions. Robert Vitalis (2007) and novelist Abdel Rahman Munif (1989), among others, have chronicled how this intimate segregation of domestic infrastructures led to worker organizing, strikes, and eventually nationalization across the twentieth century.

The emergence of offshore infrastructure changed the course of that trend, and Equatorial Guinea came on-stream just at the historical moment when, largely in response to the unmitigated disaster of Nigeria, the industry decided that the offshore was useful not only as a organizing principle for industrial operations, but also as a guiding metaphor for its relationship to production sites more broadly. In Equatorial Guinea, one repeating US industry mantra was not to be like Nigeria, shorthand for Shell Nigeria’s infamously violent presence in the Niger Delta and the robust structures of responsibility—with the company providing often-unreliable water, light, and education in a tangled relationship with local states—that typified their involvement. In Equatorial Guinea, the arrangement between the industry and that which was “outside” it was, on paper, 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 yet, it is important to resist the temptation to think of offshore infrastructure as a “clean break”—in other words, a technical change that somehow enabled radically different forms of work, profit making, or corporate relationships to take place. Rather, we might better understand offshore infrastructure as enabling certain forms of continuity. Practices that had been met with increasing resistance onshore—paying workers according to race, providing separate and strikingly unequal housing facilities, lack of meaningful training or technology transfer opportunities—can be newly naturalized in offshore work, ostensibly justified by the novel technosocial configu-
ration of the open ocean, the geophysical demands of subsea hydrocarbon, and the forms of infrastructure necessary to respond to those conditions. But of course, the desired distance from the haunting does not inhere in the infrastructure itself; instead, it has to be made and remade with tremendous effort. Nowhere is that effort clearer than in the daily life of rig labor.

“THERE’S NOBODY OUT THERE”

Offshore production may not involve the direct displacement of towns or villages; running pipelines through people’s backyards and drinking water supplies; or generally placing the considerable technology, logistics, and humans required to get hydrocarbons out of the ground in visible or disruptive spaces. This does not mean, however, that “there’s nobody out there,” as one manager claimed above. On the contrary, given the extraordinary requirements of constructing, moving, operating, and maintaining the largest mobile infrastructures in the world, oil and gas companies put people out there in large numbers.

The 115 men from twenty different nations on the FIPCO 330 (and on rigs all over the world) live “rotating” lives—spending a few weeks working and sleeping on the rig, and then a few weeks at home in Equatorial Guinea, the Philippines, Scotland, or wherever home may be. In this arrangement, each employee has his “back to back”: when one man leaves the rig to spend his twenty-eight days off, another man with the same job description comes to take over the constant work for his twenty-eight days on. On the March day I spent on the FIPCO, twenty-one workers left the rig by helicopter, and twenty workers arrived to take their places. Referred to in the industry’s (English) lingua franca as a “hitch,” each of these three-to-six-week shifts on the rig is characterized by grueling twenty-four-hour workdays. While schedules require twelve hours of work, the rig does not “stop” at night, but rather is operational twenty-four hours per day, year round. Hence, everyone on the rig is on call around the clock, and people routinely have to get up in the middle of the night to address problems. The Equatoguinean rig workers I came to know called each hitch a *marea*, the Spanish word for tide, but also evocative of seasickness, *mareado*. Workers, both international and Equatoguinean, described their rotating lives as surreal temporal experiences. One man from Houston explained that he felt like he had two parallel lives, each of which stopped when he wasn’t there and started again when he arrived, “as if on DVD.” As they fly on and off of the FIPCO and rigs like it, most of the foreign workers barely set foot on Equatoguinean soil. Although
they fly into the Malabo or Bata airports, they often then fly immediately out to platforms via helicopter, or spend one night on private company compounds before leaving for the rig the next morning. As one man put it, “I live here like I did in Angola: from the airport to the rig.”

The 115 men and their labor twins from twenty different nations and seventeen different companies, flying in and out of Equatorial Guinea to the FIPCO rig alone, is clearly a logistically and financially intensive arrangement. Companies justify the considerable work and expense of recruiting these men—negotiating their visas, moving them between rig and home, paying and insuring them—by the extent to which the wide-ranging subcontracting of production processes diffuses liability for everything from employee health insurance to explosions, away from the operating companies and into the loose web of overlapping subcontracts and legal relationships diagrammed above (see figures 1.3 and 1.4). While I discuss the quotidian details and implications of extensive (offshore and onshore) labor subcontracting in chapter 4, here I am interested in the daily life of rig work and workers, saturated with incessant comings and goings, helicopter rides, transnational plane flights, and personal mareado temporalities, where the desire and fantasy of the offshore for some becomes the lived inequality and exploitation of others.

Among the men on board the FIPCO, contracted by multiple firms and recruited from multiple countries, there were unambiguous working hierarchies. The Offshore Installation Manager (OIM) was at the top, with three supervisors under him and four “leads” under them; and then a series of workers organized by “levels” two through five, with five being the lowest. On the FIPCO, as well as on the other rigs I studied, white Americans, Brits, and Canadians held top positions almost without exception, with nationalities diversifying through the middle, and Equatoguinean workers at the bottom, with a few in level three. The two highest positions on the FIPCO—Company Man and OIM—were held by a white North American and a white Australian, respectively. White Norwegian, English, and Canadian workers held all of the supervisory and technician positions, with Russian, French, Filipino, US, Colombian, Venezuelan, and Serbian workers in positions that included Operator, Field Engineer, Mud Logger, Crane Operator, Mechanic, and Directional Driller, among others. With few exceptions, Equatoguineans occupied the bottom positions on the rig: eleven of the fourteen catering positions, Painter, Welder, Roustabout (an industry term for unskilled labor), Floorhand, Derrickhand, and Assistant Driller, among others. Men were assigned sleeping quarters on the rig according to their level, with those
at the top in private rooms, and those at the bottom in bunks that hold four or more people.

Nationality is central to this form of labor organization. Subcontracting companies (discussed at length in chapter 4) calculate each worker’s pay and rotation schedule according to his nation of origin, using cost-of-living indices from international ratings agency Standard & Poor’s (S&P) Financial Services. According to this system of differentiation, American and UK laborers work a “28/28,” that is, twenty-eight days on in Equatorial Guinea and twenty-eight days off at home, considered the best schedule. Filipino workers have the least desirable schedule: eleven weeks on and three weeks off (an “11/3”). Vitalis (2007) has argued that these racialized hierarchies, structured under the rubric of skill differentiation, have come to characterize oil operations around the world (see also McKay 2007 and chapters 2 and 4). Firms, including those in my research, have long argued that wage, schedule, and facilities segregation is not a question of racism, but of skill level. Indeed, increasingly specialized methods of oil extraction (offshore, oil sands, shale oil) require increasingly specialized labor and minimal unskilled labor. These requirements then map onto geographic inequalities in the production and dissemination of technical knowledge and expertise. And yet, even the few locals who occupied semi-technical positions—radio or crane operator, and certainly Eugenio, the Equatoguinean petroleum engineer I quoted earlier—complained repeatedly that they were kept indefinitely at the level of “trainee”: “When they bring a [white] South African . . . I have to guide him but I’m the ‘trainee.’ I spend six months showing him the work, and once these six months are finished he becomes [my boss], and I’m still the ‘trainee.’” In other words, unequal opportunities for training and education aside, even when two workers do the same job, they are often categorized, paid, and scheduled according to their nationality, a categorization that often maps too neatly onto race (a discussion I continue in chapters 2 and 4).

Dividing labor by nationality and race, of course, has been a strategy to keep wages low and inhibit worker solidarity and organizing far beyond the world’s mineral frontiers. Offshore, that strategy is given new lived empirics: work comes in short, intense bursts of mere weeks at a time; workers never know with whom they will be working on any given rotation, or what language(s) coworkers will speak; and they are always under the watchful eye of management, quite literally, in a claustrophobic floating metal atoll. You cannot steal away to a bar or join one another for a home-cooked meal, much less hold an organizing meeting at a local church in your off-hours, if some of you are in the Philippines, others in Venezuela, and still others
in Equatorial Guinea. Equatoguineans, in theory, could meet one another for labor organizing over dinner, and indeed many rig workers with whom I worked were friends or family members who socialized in their time off. But, as discussed in the introduction, Equatorial Guinea is a paranoid and arbitrarily violent dictatorship, with a particular kind of authoritarianism and labor history (Campos Serrano and Micó Abogo 2006) that has proved highly productive for US companies.

Again, offshore infrastructure in Equatorial Guinea does not enable a novel configuration of racist labor practices. Rather, it enables the continuity of practices that grew increasingly untenable onshore, but that go back over one hundred years across the world’s oil frontiers. In extraction’s offshore age, the kinds of social worlds produced on mobile rigs and platforms enable these practices of segregation to continue, facilitated by the seeming disappearance of the infrastructure on which they take place. Infrastructure here carries far more than the crude, seawater, or liquid natural gas for which it is, at least in part, designed. To paraphrase Larkin (2013), while infrastructure is matter that enables the movement of other matter, it is also matter that enables the movement, literally the mobility (in the case of rigs), of certain forms of politics—here, inequality, racism, and the disempowerment of workers. This allows us to expand on Larkin’s point about affect in that it is not only awe and fascination with infrastructure from afar that stimulates political effects; but also, as infrastructure comes to intimately shape people’s daily lives, the rhythms of their labor, and their relationships to one another, it becomes central to what Mazzarella (2012) has called the professional coordination of affect or affect management. Infrastructure has a synaesthetic effect wherein racialized difference becomes sensory and tactile—how long you can rest at home, and how long your hitches on the rig last; who you sleep with, and in how big a room; the relative heft of an S&P-calculated paycheck reflecting the fungibility of Filipinos and Colombians, Brits and Nigerians offshore. As Massumi (2002) writes, “The ability of affect to produce an economic effect more swiftly and surely than economics itself means that affect is itself a real condition . . . as infrastructural as a factory” (45).

Within these racialized hierarchies, working life on the rig is rigid and exacting. Risk is the specter under which workers’ arduous, wearying daily schedules take shape; this is risk not only in terms of accidents and safety precautions, but also in terms of shareholder value and company reputation. Through “typical day” narratives of rig work, I end this chapter with a discussion of Equatoguinean workers’ embodied experiences of rig life. I explore the highly ritualized safety practices that saturate their working days
and situate these practices historically within an industry sea change that took place after the Exxon Valdez and Enron debacles, drawing these experiences into dialog with the productivity of risk in oil futures markets. The chapter closes with a broad look at risk that puts rig work, futures markets, and these workers’ daily onshore lives in Malabo into the same frame. This is the lived experience, the habitation of the industrial and financial offshores.

**TYPICAL DAY**

Daily work on rigs is intense, regimented, and exhausting. The low-skilled, labor-intensive positions of floorhand, roustabout, pumphand, derrickhand, motor operator, and crane operator that Equatoguinean men tend to occupy are closely controlled, occasionally high-pressure, and function within inflexible schedules. At home in Malabo, local rig workers inundated me with talk of strict schedules and elaborate rituals of control and safety. Two men from different companies and platforms explain:

We work from 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., with two half-hour breaks and one lunch break of an hour. We work for ten hours and have two hours rest… I have to get permission to do any type of work. There is a procedure for getting permission.

They call me at five in the morning to eat breakfast. Then there is a pre-work meeting, to see if there are any conflicts, to see if there are any problems in any jobs, to discuss. [This meeting is from] 6:00–6:15 a.m. At 6:30 we sign the permits to work. You cannot work on anything without the permission of a supervisor. The risks have to be analyzed. At 7:15 you begin to prepare your tools, survey the work to be done, and begin to work. My work is complicated. If I make a mistake—if [I allow] the pressure [in the system] to rise to 100 percent—I will shut down the whole plant. On any given day we have between one and three permits to work, depending on the day. After completing three permits to work, you have to go back to the Offshore Installation Manager, and then you can continue working. At 5:00 p.m., in my case, I stop working to fill out a report which I send to the supervisor about corrections or equipment that has failed. At 5:45 or 6:00 p.m. it’s dinner, and to sleep. If something happens during the night, they come to call me in my room. After dinner I shower, and get in bed at 9:00 p.m.

I talked to men who worked on five different rigs across all three major operating companies and they all had similar “typical day” narratives. Ev-
everyone started at 6:00 a.m. after having breakfast (available starting at 5:00 a.m.). Some had two fifteen-minute breaks before and after lunch; others had two thirty-minute breaks. Lunch for everyone was one hour. Everyone stopped working at 6:00 p.m. to eat dinner. With few exceptions, each man made the point that he was exhausted at the end of the day and would fall into bed. Equatoguinean rotation schedules were either “2/2s”—two weeks on and two weeks off—or “28/28s,” working and living on the platform for a month at a time, with the following month off and home on land.

Labor schedules and tasks were monitored closely, explicitly for the purposes of risk avoidance and safety. (Remember that my own rig visit started immediately with a safety training mini-course on video, a test to ensure I had paid attention, and a liability waiver. And João, my guide, was the rig’s safety coordinator.) Petroleum production is widely acknowledged to be a risky industry, rife with explosion and fire hazards, limb-threatening equipment, and noxious chemicals, among other perilous potentialities. The open ocean of the offshore and the helicopter rides required to get there concentrate and exacerbate these dangers.11 My own rig visit felt like a protracted exercise in both embodied and ornamental safety rituals—from what I was given to wear; to what I was told to take off; to the ways I was trained to walk, climb, and descend stairs; to the safety videos, manuals, and waivers I was required to study and sign, literally from the moment I stepped off the helicopter. João instructed me to take off all rings, earrings, necklaces, the hairband around my wrist, and anything else that could snag or catch. None of these items were allowed on the rig. While walking on the rig, if a railing was available I was instructed to hold it at all times, in particular on stairs, which, depending on their pitch, one had to descend facing backward.

For Equatoguinean rig workers, this exacting fixation on safety stretched beyond bodily adornment and comportment to the system of Permits to Work, mentioned by both men quoted above. Essentially a job permission slip, each permit details the job to be done, which tools will be included, whether the work is hot (welding) or cold (lifting, relocating equipment), the possible risks involved, and how those risks will be avoided. Tasks cannot proceed without a Permit to Work, secured from supervisors at the morning meeting. If a task arises during the course of the day for which one does not have a permit, a worker cannot proceed with the task until he secures a new permit. Permits to Work must be posted visibly at the job site on the rig, so that as others circulate they can discern what is going on at any given location. Each permit must be removed and cleared with an authority when the
job is completed. On the FIPCO, if jobs were considered complicated—those involving multiple personnel and tasks—they required an additional THINK drill and a special permit. Also known as the THINK Process for incident prevention, a THINK drill is a five-step, pre-job meeting:

2. Inspect—Inspect all equipment to be used.
3. Identify—Identify all potential hazards.
4. Communicate—Communicate all relevant information.
5. Control—Control the operation.

While these details are mundane in and of themselves, they offer a sense of the intensely regimented, hyper-scheduled, and monitored working day on the rig. All of the men with whom I had in-depth interviews at home in Malabo repeatedly mentioned their respective companies’ overt and constant

Figure 1.7. Author in personal protective equipment (PPE).
attention to safety. Talking in amazement about helicopters—a notoriously dangerous offshore technology—Antonio explained:

I am telling you that perhaps for you this wouldn't be so incredible, but in our environment we had never seen things like this; maybe on television. We have never had equipment like this. It makes me say, where am I? How do you control so much technology? For the helicopter we watch a safety video, [that covers] emergency landings, what to do; if the helicopter falls how you can escape; where is the emergency equipment; where are the escape boats. [We wear] double auditory protection and life jackets. The pilot asks you if there has been anything that you didn't understand. There has not been a single helicopter accident.

For Antonio and others, the complexity, power, and potential hazard of the equipment with which they worked often generated a reverence that naturalized the rhythms of their working days. Antonio’s words recall Larkin’s (2013) insistence on infrastructure’s capacity to “generate desire and awe in autonomy of its technical function . . . the sense of fascination [infrastructures] stimulate is an important part of their political effect” (333). Rogelio, in a safety soliloquy that would make his employer proud, explained that “for [this company] safety is first. It is worth more to finish the day without an accident than to complete the work that you have been given. [We count the] days that we are able to go without an accident.” As Antonio and Rogelio make clear, this safety-saturated atmosphere was not only experientially definitive of working offshore, but also a welcome characteristic of rig work. While this gratitude in the face of serious hazard is readily understandable, it was an important ethnographic discovery for me, because it so directly contravened my own visceral response to safety measures in the Equatoguinean industry more generally.

In the eight months of fieldwork that preceded my visit to the Fipco, among my strongest impressions of the oil industry in Equatorial Guinea was a corporate culture so safety-saturated that it bordered on the comedic. On one occasion, I was in a company vehicle with an British industry employee who was driving painfully slowly, and an apparatus beeped loudly any time he hit forty miles per hour. Cars whizzed past us. When I chided him, he told me that every time the apparatus beeped a report was sent to Houston headquarters. On a walk through another company’s compound with the wife of a migrant manager, I bent to tie my shoe, and she joked that her husband would need three signatures to secure permission to do what I had just done. Industry offices were wallpapered with safety achievements—how
many “incident-free” days, how many months without a “lost-time” incident. Acronyms abounded—keep it simple, think drills, start. In Malabo, the T-shirts that give safety acronyms their public lives could be seen on the backs of many local men, women, and children, having found reincarnation in the used clothing markets.

These elaborately choreographed and audited safety rituals are the outcomes of earlier offshore fantasies run aground, the hauntings of the Exxon Valdez spill, the Piper Alpha disaster, and the Enron/Arthur Andersen scandal, a list to which the Deepwater Horizon is now certainly to be added (Bond 2013). As many management informants explained to me, this series of disasters and their nightmarish human, environmental, public relations, and shareholder consequences motivated a corporate culture sea change to newly confront these risks, affecting everything from accounting practices to rituals of rig safety. Where I scoffed at beeping, speed-monitoring apparatuses and ridiculous acronyms, for my migrant management informants, these were the procedures through which they controlled and monitored working environments, and the audited outcomes (incident-free days) could be used in shareholder reports to reassure investors that times had changed.

For Equatoguinean rig workers, the micromanagement of time and tasks that defined their labor environment was exhausting but welcome. Yet for most of them, the Enron debacle or the Exxon Valdez spill that instigated the safety regime for which Permits to Work are a synecdoche were snippets on television, if they were anything at all. An analysis of the Enron/Exxon Valdez outcomes complicates workers’ faith in the safety rituals they carried out. The shift in corporate practices in the wake of these disasters, in part, actually rescinded responsibility for workers and replaced it with internal, self-regulated safety procedures intended to keep “recorded” or “lost-time” incidents down, and stock prices up. As one Equatoguinean man who lost a finger in a rig accident found out, neither the operating company to which his work provided oil, nor the subcontracting company to which his salary provided profit, could help when he could no longer work on a rig. And, as two other workers reported, their oim’s act of throwing broken radial saws into the ocean on not one, but two, occasions, in order that the incidents would go unreported, prompts us to ask: For whom is the offshore arrangement simpler or safer? For whom does it redistribute risk and where does that redistributed risk go?
Alfredo was an Equatoguinean economist who had long lived abroad and completed his postgraduate studies in London before moving home to work first for the Major Corporation, and later for Regal Energy. When I asked him what he did as an economist at Regal, he responded: “Controls: audit, corporate governance, business ethics, Foreign Corrupt Practices Act. I design and implement processes and procedures for control and compliance.” When I admitted that I had no idea what “controls” meant, he offered an example, explaining that he had recently been working to implement a system that would allow company vehicles to pay tolls without having to stop at the toll booths that separate central Malabo from the airport road on which company headquarters were located. When I remarked on the apparent triviality of that project in relation to corporate governance and business ethics, he continued that he handled anything that had to do with “control and safety,” from the crucial to the humdrum. “These have been the key words,” he emphasized, “safety since the Exxon Valdez and control since Enron/Arthur Andersen; i.e., look for what the company is trying to avoid.”

Alfredo explained that before Enron, audits looked only at financial statements, but the Arthur Andersen scandal exposed glossy financial statements as mere surfaces prepared to encourage shareholders to trust company finances. These statements revealed little about what was actually going on in the company, let alone about the processes that led to the figures therein. In 2002, in the wake of the Enron scandal (and others, including Tyco and WorldCom), the US Congress passed the Sarbanes-Oxley Act, a federal law intended to strengthen corporate accounting controls. In practice in Equatorial Guinea, Alfredo remarked: “Sarbox, or sox 404, as we lovingly refer to it, guides what I do. [There are] procedures for absolutely everything, and the procedures are standardized in almost all affiliates. The company maintains them everywhere they go. If I was to work in an accounting department anywhere in the world, I would already know the procedures.” Alfredo was not my only informant to mention the aftermath of Enron and the seemingly arcane 2002 legislation. (I certainly had never heard of Sarbanes-Oxley before arriving in Central Africa.) David, the manager of a major oil services company, explained that after Sarbanes-Oxley, “you and I can’t do business on a paper napkin. . . . But before Enron that was different. When I was in South America we did a lot of dodgy things. It used to be that the ends justified the means. [The attitude was] go ahead and do it and we’ll fix it later.”
When I asked David about the potential ramifications of paper napkin business in the post-Enron era, he responded that, “the oil industry is small, and that kind of behavior is not admired. It’s quite regulated. You have one scandal and they blacklist people. One scandal, and can you imagine the impact on the Nymex stock price?”

While I discuss the proceduralism and self-regulation described by both Alfredo and David at greater length in chapter 3, what interests me here is threefold. First, both the Exxon Valdez disaster and the later Enron scandal ushered in new “keywords” in the oil and gas industry: safety and control. Second, these keywords have fundamentally changed practices on the ground—from how many signatures one needs to tie one’s shoe, to audit procedures following new US laws, to elaborate risk-avoidance rituals and their tabulation in the recording of days without a lost-time incident (Radial saw? What radial saw?). Third, the grounded practices to control risk—both financial and industrial—are primarily indexed to shareholder value, secondarily indexed to human safety, and not at all to labor rights. “One scandal, and can you imagine the impact on the Nymex stock price?” I want to dwell for a moment longer on risk where we find it here: at the intersection of accounting procedures and Permits to Work, or of financial and industrial practice.

The packaging of risk as a commodity is among the most profitable of contemporary financial endeavors (LiPuma and Lee 2004; Thrift 2005; Zaloom 2004; Poon 2009; Power 1997, 2007). Indeed, Guyer (2009) suggests that risk be added to land, labor, and money as a fourth category in Polanyi’s famous list of commodity fictions. Although the oil and gas industry is, of course, traditionally reliant on the production and sale of a tangible industrial commodity, it is also deeply invested in what Zaloom (2004) calls “the productive life of risk” (365). Of the approximately two hundred million barrels of oil traded per day on Nymex, much of it is “paper oil,” or the buying and selling of futures contracts. Futures markets are technologies for distributing risk: oil companies and others who need a constant supply buy futures, essentially a contract on future delivery at a price agreed-upon now. Investment banks and US pension funds are also heavily invested in the oil futures markets, not because they need oil, but because the investments can be extremely profitable (Guyer 2009). Based on her involvement in the Chad–Cameroon pipeline project, Guyer also points out that financial instruments are inserted at multiple stages in these brick-and-mortar oil industry projects, from debt servicing to actuarial calculations (2009, 209;
see also Leonard 2016). This intercalation of industrial and financial productivity involves multiple moments in which to trace “risk as a problem of practice” (Zaloom 2004, 368) or “the actual ways in which risk instruments intervene in the world” (Guyer 2009, 218; Johnson 2015).

On the one hand, in futures markets, risk signifies an opening; it conjures opportunities for increased profit in a zone of possibility and chance (LiPuma and Lee 2004; Miyazaki 2003; Riles 2004; Maurer 2005; Thrift 2005; Zaloom 2004). These are risks one should take, because the yields they promise outstrip and are, in fact, increased by their dangers. On the other hand, as I will detail below, the risks addressed by Permits to Work and helicopter safety videos in the lives of temporarily subcontracted and semi-skilled Equatoguinean employees evoke volatility and fear, conjuring the narrowing of opportunities and prospects. These are risks one should, but probably cannot, avoid (see also Simone 2004; Guyer 1995, 2004; Ferguson 1999). (See Peterson 2014 for this dual nature of risk in Nigerian pharmaceutical markets.) And yet, these are not simply different moments or places of risk, but rather comprise an ethnographic scene that shows profitable risk and exploitative risk to be mutually dependent. To what extent is productive, profitable, and voluntary risk enabled by, and funded by, the destructive and seemingly intractable risk shouldered by (racialized, classed, gendered) others? As Karen Ho (2009) has pointed out, in the mortgage crisis of 2007–2008, Wall Street’s professional risk-takers relied on the income streams of middle- and working-class homeowners (see also Appel et al. 2019; Roitman 2014; Poon 2009). For professional risk-takers, the repackaged mortgages were short-term securitization opportunities, whereas for the homeowners they were both homes and long-term investments. The professional risk-takers required the risk of the homeowners. Dick Bryan and Michael Rafferty (2011, 2018) have also argued that the working and middle classes are central to the profitability of financial risk. Their pension funds, mortgages, auto loans, and health insurance payments are securitized, packaged, and sold as commodities. Households, and one might even say labor, are the stable source of investment; so too, I want to suggest, with subcontracted rig labor. To rephrase the questions I asked above—For whom does the offshore redistribute risk, and where does that redistributed risk go?—using different language: “What is risk as a transacted thing? From whom and to whom is risk transferred? Since mitigation can only ever be partial, where is the excess located in relation to a theory of ownership?” (Guyer 2009, 215; Maurer 1998).
RISK AT HOME: WORKERS’ DAILY LIVES IN MALABO

My visceral response to the oil industry’s comically relentless safety practices was intensified by contrasting them with daily life in Malabo, a city which was essentially without the safety and risk-prevention provisions of many other urban environments. Common sights in the city included construction or road improvement projects haphazardly set up in the middle of everything, with day laborers performing welding; swinging metal beams; using jackhammers and bulldozers; and creating huge ditches that dropped into the bowels of the old colonial undercity, without safety glasses, hard hats, or safety equipment of any kind, let alone a sign or brightly colored tape alerting pedestrians to walk elsewhere. As a foreigner, navigating scenes like this was definitive of living in the city, especially given the overwhelming quantity of hydrocarbon and construction industry-related heavy machinery, equipment, and materials in constant circulation and use (Appel 2018a).

In the claustrophobically small city, pedestrians routinely walked directly through these sites on their way here or there, hoping not to get sprayed by welding spatter or fall into a ditch. It was also common to see huge flatbed trucks careening though the city streets holding stacks of unsecured metal tubes or rebar piled high in pyramid shapes, with day laborers perched precariously (to me), yet apparently comfortably (to them), on top. One day I did hear that one of these trucks took a roundabout too fast, and all the tubing fell off, along with the men, one of whom was killed in the accident. In a country where the public hospital was known as a place where people went to die, not to be treated for broken necks, the risk was a serious one.

Official work for the US-based oil and gas companies that form the subject of this book would never be performed under these conditions, but rather, under their comic opposite of the beeping and reporting-to-base speed-limit car monitor. Indeed, I laughed when I saw the photo in figure 1.8 for the first time. I had intended to capture a migrant manager mansion on a private residential oil compound, but instead, I unintentionally captured perhaps the only twenty square feet in Equatorial Guinea that contained both a fire hydrant and a speed limit sign.

Taking the contrast of needing three signatures to tie your shoe with overburdened trucks careening around corners with workers perched on top into consideration, one can hear the rig workers all the more clearly when they marvel at helicopter safety videos and recite industry slogans. They are understandably thankful for this industry-specific, transplanted conception
of safety in what they know to be a highly technical and often dangerous environment. But this conception of safety that allows Equatoguineans working on rigs to potentially survive a helicopter crash cannot remove them from the larger insecurities and risks of their lives. In fact, these workers’ very removal onto offshore rigs for up to one month at a time—despite the acronyms of think and start—actually exacerbates the most pressing and dangerous insecurities they face. While management can work furiously toward the disentanglement promised in the offshore setup, subcontracted local workers cannot simplify the risks they negotiate on a daily basis as they try to reconcile the promises of Permits to Work with the promises of security for their own lives and those of their family members. As one Equatoguinean rig worker put it forcefully to me: “How are you going to talk to me about safety, if you know that your child has no water or no light and no medical care, not to mention your wife? They don’t have anything to eat today and you’re talking to me about safety!?"

During my interviews with Equatoguinean offshore workers, work-related risk on the platforms was not the locus of their concern. Seatbelts, hard hats, and safety glasses, while welcome, did not begin to address the

Figure 1.8. Fire hydrant and speed limit sign on the Smith compound.
main locus of risk that they faced on a daily basis. In Malabo and its surrounding residential communities of Ela Nguema, Lamper, and Campo Yaounde, these men and their families lived with sporadic electricity, no running water, and inadequate healthcare. Malaria and typhoid were rampant, and child mortality from afflictions as basic as diarrhea was common. Thus, while the risk of a helicopter falling out of the sky was indeed grave, as was the risk of cutting off a finger at work, when compared with the deep, daily insecurities of these men's lives, those risks and the elaborate rituals set up to avoid them seemed as trivial as the acronyms used to remember them. Two workers explain:

[Working on the platform] is very risky, difficult. To have to be there for twenty-nine days is very difficult. It could be that something happens to my child and the [agency that subcontracts me] will not help me with anything. [I am] very worried about my family and everyone else.

In my particular case to live on the platform is difficult. My family is far away. . . . The most difficult is that we have sixty minutes of communication every week. This isn’t enough because they calculate it in a distinct way. If the person doesn’t pick up the phone they cut minutes. You can’t pass your limit. . . . Ultimately when you have a problem onshore and you leave the platform, those days you don’t get paid. For example, if you’re on the platform for ten days and you have a problem onshore and you leave for two days, they cut those days. Being [on the platform] sometimes my head hurts because of the pressure. I think of my family, sick children. I can’t leave the platform. If I leave there isn’t any money. What will it have been worth?

The first worker talks about the risk of platform work, but does not have helicopters or fire hazards in mind. The risk is that, while away from his family for twenty-nine days, something could happen to his child, and not only would he not be there, but he worries (correctly) that the agency employing him would do nothing. The second man brings up the issue of communication with home. The only way to know if everyone is okay, or more accurately, what is not okay on any particular day, is to call home. However, the company allows less than ten minutes per day of phone time, with time counted off for incomplete calls. Imagine negotiating in six minutes per day what to do if a child or uncle has malaria, if a relative has died, or if there’s a fire in the neighborhood, all common occurrences. Should he leave the platform to take care of it? He doesn’t want to leave because then he won’t get paid and “What will it have been worth?” As one rig worker's wife put it:
“It seems bad when they leave for so long and I’m home alone suffering with the children. There are [six] of us in the house and my husband is the only one that has work.” The cost of living in Equatorial Guinea—sporadic water, electricity, healthcare—is not factored into offshore work. As Mbembe (2001), Simone (2004), and Roitman (2005) have pointed out in other post-colonial African contexts, the calculus of compensation is radically divorced from actual labor value. Although neither unusual nor specific to post-colonial Africa, this divorce takes on a particular severity in contexts where insurance and social welfare have long been provided by networks of personal relations, as is the case in Equatorial Guinea, not by contractual obligations won through labor rights or citizenship entitlements.

The details of rotation schedules and phone-time allowance—seemingly trivial—take on serious weight for Equatoguinean laborers:

Now our shifts are two weeks on and two weeks off. Before we had to work and live on the rigs for four weeks with four weeks off but because of our families, because they are home without electricity, because we cannot communicate with them, we had to change that schedule. After three years, we complained to the company and asked to have a 2/2 rotation. At first the company didn’t accept, but eventually they did.

Many are leaving the company and [the company] knows. You are only given two minutes per day to talk to your wife. We begged, please give us time to talk to our families. But they forget that [the] French can talk to their wives on the internet, or the phone cards that let you talk for hours. But the rates here only let you talk for fourteen minutes per week. They say they understand our condition, but the company really doesn’t. You are cut off from your family completely. With all this difficulty you prefer to be with your family alone.

Where foreign rig laborers could count on internet connections and international phone cards to keep them in touch with home, international inequality in the spread of technology in homes (let alone electricity provision in Malabo) guaranteed that for local labor, fourteen minutes per week on the phone with one’s family was simply insufficient. The subcontracted conditions under which these men worked intentionally abdicated responsibility for the precarity of their onshore living conditions, a precarity best stabilized by the presence of people. The more able bodies in the house, the better to manage life’s daily challenges. With healthy men gone, even for short periods of time, vulnerability and worry increased exponentially (Moodie and Ndatshe 1994;
Meillassoux 1981). One man captured this grave misunderstanding of conditions in what became a productive phrase to think with: “We are working like Americans but being paid like Africans.” As he explains:

The cost of living is so high here. There’s no water. There’s no electricity. You go to the hospital, you die there. Here this money isn’t acceptable. When you tell us this is a lot, we ask, for whom? We are working like Americans but being paid like Africans. . . . You can’t have it both ways. Either make us work like Guineans and treat us like Guineans, or make us work like Americans and treat us like Americans.

In this man’s narrative, to “work like an American” is to work long, hard hours in a safe environment; to be able to talk to your wife for free and endlessly over the internet that she has in her home, enabled by the electricity she also has; and to be compensated accordingly. To “work like an African,” on the contrary, is to work fewer hours and be compensated less, with the idea that the remaining time spent with the family putting out literal and figurative fires is compensation in and of itself. To “have it both ways” is to make these men work as if they were Americans, but to compensate them as Africans.

**CONCLUSION: OFFSHORE FUTURES**

This chapter has traced some of the work that allows Equatorial Guinea to recede from view, as the hydrocarbons from its Exclusive Economic Zone are extracted, produced, and exported from an offshore in which oversight, liability, and ties to terrestrial communities are intentionally stretched thin. I have suggested that a broadening of the category “offshore,” to encompass financial and industrial relations at the same time, helps us to understand how it is that profit can be disentangled from the places in which it is made, at once increasing risk for some and making it more profitable for others. Whether through disperse corporate geographies for tax “planning,” in which all of the major companies in Equatorial Guinea operate through Cayman Island subsidiaries, or through mobile technosocial assemblages of colossal infrastructure with racialized labor already on board, the offshore becomes a space of deregulation in terms of finance, labor, and the environment. Central to this project of disentanglement is the diffusion of liability in the form of managing risk. Oil futures markets and Permits to Work both participate in this project, and risk is at once enormously profitable and an unbearable burden, radically unequal in its qualities and distribution.
Writing of traders in Chicago’s Board of Trade Futures market, Zaloom (2004) notes that the daily practices of their working lives “encourage the production of subjects who can sustain themselves under high-stakes conditions and thereby draw profit from economic risk” (366). Compare this to the situations of Antonio, Rogelio, and the other workers quoted above, who were at once thankful for the risk-avoidance practices in which they had been trained, and utterly marginalized from the spectacular profit their risks were reaping elsewhere. Like Zaloom’s traders, risk here has arguably produced subjects who can sustain themselves under high-stakes conditions, but their futures hardly profit from their practices. Late one Malabo afternoon, I was sitting in my apartment with a group of four Equatoguinean rig workers home from their marea. An impassioned friend they had brought along interrupted one as he responded somewhat listlessly to my questions about their working lives, salary, and home. “My friends do not have a future. They can’t even build a house. . . . Neither my friends nor anyone who has worked in the industry has any type of guarantee for life having worked this many years. The cost of life here—food, school fees, hospital, medications—it’s all gone. They don’t have social security; they can’t buy a house, nothing. As older people, they will be poor.” Risk of oil bunkering or community entitlements is certainly minimized in the offshore arrangement. Risk’s foil—liability—is also stretched thin as companies operate in tax loopholes and regulatory paradises. Who profits from these practices, whose risks they hedge and whose they exacerbate, whose futures they guarantee and whose they foreclose, is also clear as the open ocean, seen from above.

Ethnographic attention to the FIPCO 330 and the larger corporate archipelago of which it is a part offers the opportunity to follow how certain qualities often understood as intrinsic to capitalism—standardization, replicability, indifference to local context—are built. Here, petroleum’s industrial offshore not only concretizes a metaphor, but also shows how desire-filled fantasies of capitalism itself—as placeless, as frictionless—come into being in tenuous and work-intensive ways. In other words, the offshore is real. Its effects are real. It is not without friction; it is not the capitalist utopia of placeless economic interaction. It is full of specters of political risk: men from twenty different countries and seventeen different companies consequentially divided by nationality and race; Equatoguineans underpaid and held indefinitely at the level of trainee; and a corporate form so multiple and attenuated that, paradoxically, it can seem to disintegrate altogether. But nor is the power of the offshore, its effects, undone by attention to this teeming and contentious sociality.
In chapter 2, the ethnographic material seemingly moves from offshore to onshore—from rigs to the companies’ gated residential and corporate enclaves. Yet, as a general industry descriptor, “the offshore” still encompasses these spaces, as companies work to distance themselves from life outside their walls. Racial segregation remains central to this work, and raced and gendered domesticity and intimacy emerges along with it.