The Licit Life of Capitalism

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CHAPTER TWO

THE Enclave

Figure 2.1. “True to Texas” Miller Lite sign on Endurance compound.

Every Wednesday since roughly 1999, “the wives” have gathered for two hours of food, drink, and a card game called Continental in the well-appointed home of whoever agreed to hostess that week. These women—the wives of migrant oil and gas company management assigned to Equatorial Guinea—socialize, plan charity projects, trade coffee beans for Crystal Light, and relax over cards, casseroles, nachos, crudités, cakes, and Diet Coke. Although far from the only scheduled weekly activity these women shared, which included mahjong, stitching, water aerobics, tennis, and calligraphy among others, cards was the most popular and the longest standing. As one woman who had been living in and out of Malabo since 1999 remarked, “We al-
ways played cards on Wednesdays. And unbelievably, every time I’ve come back here, Continental is still held on Wednesdays. That has continued. And many times some women have wanted to change that and do other things, but it’s always come back to playing Continental.” Continental on Wednesday afternoons in this suburb of Texas just outside Malabo was, by the time I arrived in 2006, a native ritual.

Women took turns hosting Wednesday games in their homes, located in the private residential/industrial compounds owned and operated by US oil and gas companies. A trip to one of these compounds for those living outside their walls meant lengthy stops at gates and guardhouses, where security personnel checked your requisite invitation against a logbook; where you offered license plate numbers, phone numbers, and other identifying information; and where you had to leave official identification at the security office for the duration of your stay on the compound.

One Wednesday in September 2008, I was on my way to cards at the largest compound just outside Malabo with a few wives from another compound. (I tried to carpool to cards whenever possible because Malabo’s public transportation—informal taxis—was prohibited on compound grounds.) As had become our Wednesday ritual, my carpool mates and I stood together for almost thirty minutes in the security checkpoint building while the young Equatoguinean man at the desk searched in vain for our identification information in a database that never seemed to be updated, despite our weekly visits. As each of us gave him our full identification information again, and he painstakingly entered it again, the waiting wives began to talk about home. Only days before, Hurricane Ike had badly damaged much of Houston and eastern Texas. These women and many others in Equatorial Guinea had homes, family, and friends in the area who, in the wake of the hurricane, had been living without electricity or running water for several days. One woman expressed worry about her twenty-four-year-old daughter in Houston who had told her that there was no more gas, and ice was sold out at local stores, as were ice chests. She wondered aloud, “How will she eat?” But in the next breath she noted the incongruity, the strangeness, that people in Equatorial Guinea live without electricity and running water every day.

Indeed, people in Equatorial Guinea, including those residing in the capital city, live with endemic typhoid and malaria, and largely without running water and reliable electricity in their homes. In affluent areas, the lack of public infrastructure gives way to private provision, and those with the means to do so buy generators for electricity and/or put tanks on their roofs
for water. But even my next-door neighbor—the Ministry of Finance and Budgets—was routinely dark for days and even weeks at a time. The water that occasionally ran for twenty minutes each morning in my Malabo apartment flowed untreated through corroded, colonial-era pipes. Education and healthcare systems were similarly erratic, as were food staples in local markets. With no industrialized agriculture, when the border closed with Cameroon (which it often did), fresh vegetables rapidly disappeared from Malabo’s markets and prices skyrocketed on the dwindling piles that remained.

Meanwhile, not four miles away from the capital’s public infrastructure woes, these wives and I stood at a checkpoint waiting to enter something very different. Once past the guard, the gates and walls of the Endurance compound opened onto manicured lawns, towering ceiba trees with landscaped hedges and flowers, paved roads with speed limits and fire hydrants, stately suburban homes with suvs in garages, and a sprawling office/industrial complex (Appel 2012d). The sheer concentration of resources within this compound and others like it in Equatorial Guinea is difficult to overstate. The Endurance compound alone generated enough energy to power the entire country’s electricity needs twenty-four hours per day, every day. Food to feed foreign employees was shipped in from Europe and the United States. The luxurious mansions in which migrant management lived were serviced by their own sewage and septic systems, and appointed with flat screen televisions, wireless Internet, and landline phone service with Houston area codes. Each house had an Equatoguinean maid; the office complexes had Equatoguinean janitorial services; and Equatoguinean gardeners and landscapers (employed by a Spanish-owned company with roots in the colonial era) maintained each compound’s pristine grounds. These compounds also included pools, gyms, basketball and tennis courts, restaurants, bars, and at one location, a movie theater and small golf course. Malaria, endemic to the Equatorial Guinea just on the other side of the wall, had been all but eradicated within the compounds. In one particularly evocative description, an older Equatoguinean man who had never been inside one of these compounds, but knew them through local lore, described what was behind the walls as una limpieza terrible; literally, “a terrible cleanliness,” but perhaps more accurately a fearsome cleanliness, where fearsome can mean both terrifying and awesome.

Management-level migrant oil workers and their wives living in these lavish “suburbs of Houston” received up to a 75 percent salary increase for working in what was known in the industry as a “hardship post.” Equatoguineans, regardless of their class position, governmental authority, or employ-
ment with the company, were prohibited from living on the compounds. While locals came and went as security guards, maids, gardeners, secretaries, local content managers, or government liaisons, public transport was prohibited from entering the compounds, and all nonresident personnel had to wear an employee or visitor’s badge at all times while inside.

This chapter is about these compounds, domestic and corporate life within them, and the lived disjuncture from life outside their walls. Inspired, on the one hand, by the spatialization of the enclaves themselves, in which domestic and corporate life cohabit, and on the other by feminist anthropology, which has long held that domestic arrangements of marriage and kinship are political and economic affairs constitutive of capitalist practice (Wynter 1982, 2003; Enloe 1990; Federici 1998; Yanagisako 2002; Stoler 2010; Bear et al. 2015; Hoang 2015), this chapter analyzes domesticity and corporate daily life together. In particular, I am interested in how the segregation of the enclaves, not only from life “outside their walls,” but perhaps more importantly, the raced and classed segregation within their walls, is evidence of the cultural work required to enliven the licit life of capitalism. I am interested in how, for instance, reproducing the nuclear family structure (if only for the highest managers) mobilizes white heteronormative marriage to communicate industry morality and even standardization, in contrast to “local” corruption, or how segregating foreign worker housing by “skill level” maps neatly onto racial and national categories, and in turn onto rotation schedules and salaries.

Here, the scalability of global capitalism, so clearly seen in the offshore, is always a question of domesticity and gendered, racialized subjectivities; in this chapter, white womanhood in particular. “Race [is] a primary and protean category for colonial capitalism and . . . managing the domestic [is] crucial to it” (Stoler 2010, 13). As I argued in the introduction, in relating Vitalis’s (2007) work on segregation in the world’s mineral enclaves to Barry’s (2006) work on technological zones, the whiteness of the compounds, their racial segregation, actually comes to signify a certain kind of licit practice, in which white : nonwhite is semiotically mapped onto tenuous infrastructural and technical distinctions between West : non-West :: standard : corrupt :: global : local. Segregation and intimate life, paradoxically, come to signify heightened standardization, repetition, and universality, drawing on select postcolonial meanings attributed to heteronormative whiteness, including expertise, virtue, technology, meritocracy, and philanthropy. The white women with whom I waited at the gate that day—the caretakers of white male physical well-being, and the guardians of racialized morality and
privilege (Stoler 2010)—are a constitutive piece of the licit life of capitalism in Equatorial Guinea.

Rendering capitalism licit is, in part, about the ways we ethically partition responsibility for “others,” and how those partitions are at once individually embodied and materialized in corporate, residential, and urban planning. This chapter focuses on the work of making tenuous separations and disentanglements on behalf of the licit life of capitalism. We might think of the material in this chapter as the domestic offshore, to tie the enclaves to the offshoring practices I discussed in chapter 1. Rather than simply showing how apparently separate experiences on either side of the enclave walls are, in fact, part of the same economic and ethical picture (which, of course, they are), I ask, instead: By what processes are “the proliferation of connections” between the enclaves and wider Equatoguinean life framed or bracketed into convincingly lived separations? (Callon 1998, 4). What work went into the imagining of these enclaves? What kinds of unmapping and frontier-making (Tsing 2005)? What kinds of white masculinity and femininity work? If racialization is always a relationship, this white gender work in relation to what ideas about “Africa,” Equatorial Guinea, and Blackness? To expose connections that were intentionally severed leaves intact the processes by which that separation came to be; it overlooks the considerable work required to produce the effect of separation itself. In the enclave, disentanglement is crafted in architecture, infrastructure, exceptional fiscal statuses, food consumption, telephone area codes, heteronormative white domesticity, and residential labor segregation—an assemblage that allows those who might otherwise experience the troubled intimacy of oil extraction and Equatoguinean life to exist in what quite reasonably feels like a separate ethical picture. Stoler (2010) describes this separation in a different time and place: “A cordon sanitaire surrounded European enclaves, was wrapped around mind and body, around each European man and his home. White prestige became redefined by the conventions that would safeguard the moral, cultural, and physical wellbeing of its agents, with which European women were charged. Colonial politics locked European men and women into routinized protection of their physical health and social space in ways that bound gender prescriptions to the racial cleavages between ‘us’ and ‘them’” (77).

This chapter is divided into five sections. Section 1 discusses the “lay of the land”: a descriptive mapping of the major enclave settlements in Equatorial Guinea focused on the relationships among race, labor, and the built environment. Section 2 is an effort to contextualize what I experienced as the exoticness of Equatorial Guinea’s gated enclaves through their historical con-
tinuity with colonial settlements, company towns, and more contemporary forms of zonal capitalism (Winters 1996), including special economic zones, free zones, and maquiladoras. Section 3 traces the decision-making processes that led oil and gas companies to build enclaves in Equatorial Guinea, introducing the idea of ring-fencing—“the separation of non-resident corporate persons from domestic economies and taxes and [the denial] to resident corporate persons the same privilege granted to foreign ones” (Maurer 2005, 479). Section 4 explores practices of corporeal disentanglement: corporate and domestic ring-fencing in the enclaves as an attempted circumscription of health, sexuality, gender, and race (Enloe 1990; Stoler 2010; Vitalis 2007). Finally, through an exploration of the wives in their “golden cages” (as many of them described compound life), Section 5 thinks through the gendered inhabitation and effects of multiple forms of isolation and segregation.

THE LAY OF THE LAND

Methodologically, the enclaves were the most traditionally “ethnographic” of my research sites. Consider Bonvillain’s (2009) textbook description of ethnographic research:

To conduct ethnographic research, anthropologists do “fieldwork,” that is, they live among the people they are studying to compile a full record of their activities. They learn about people’s behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes. They study how they make their living, obtain their food, and supply themselves with tools, equipment, and other products. They study how families and communities are organized, and how people form clubs and associations, discuss common interests, and resolve disputes. And they investigate the relationship between the people and their larger social institutions—the nations they are part of and their place in local, regional, and global economies.” (6)

The familiarly problematic anthropological conceit that a researcher can arrive in an apparently static place where people live and come to know their behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes; how they make their living, obtain their food, and supply themselves with tools; the organization of their families and communities, clubs, and associations; and their relationships to the nations and wider economies of which they are a part, is uncannily close to the information I present in this chapter. Compound walls seemed to circumscribe everything from food provision to housing, kinship to citizenship, giving the enclaves the feeling of anthropology’s timeless, bounded com-
munity. And this was precisely their intended effect—that the world inside compound walls could seem to be completely separate from the world outside, despite its deep entanglements with Equatorial Guinea’s broader political, infrastructural, and social realities.

Each of the three largest US oil and gas companies in Equatorial Guinea—Major, Endurance, and Smith—has its own residential/industrial enclave, and all share these broad features of apparent boundedness. All three are private, in that both residents and nonresidents cannot come and go at will, but must stop at guard gates to offer identification, declare the purpose of their visit, and register their presence on the compound. You cannot enter the compound unless you have an invitation, and no public transport from Malabo or Bata is allowed past the gates. Residents often have curfews, or “lock-downs” that respond to regional security concerns, and all three compounds have a badge system where visitors and employees alike must display badges on their persons at all times.

The Endurance and Major compounds sit on old Malabo’s outskirts. The Smith compound, in Río Muni, is twenty-five minutes by car from the main continental city of Bata. Among the three compounds, Endurance’s is by far the largest due to its substantial onshore industrial footprint consisting of a Liquid Natural Gas (LNG) plant, a methanol plant, and storage and refining facilities. Because the Major Corporation and the Smith Corporation do all of their processing, storage, and offloading offshore, and do not have LNG or methanol plants, they have much smaller onshore footprints. All three compounds contain company headquarters within the gates, offices where both migrants and nationals work on a daily basis, as well as residential facilities for migrant work forces. I spent considerable time in each of the three largest compounds, and the ethnographic data I use in this chapter are drawn from all three spaces. I do my best, however, not to conflate the enclaves, creating a “typical” space. Informants in each company would often go to great lengths to differentiate their corporate culture and compound from the others. Rather than either creating a “typical” compound or dutifully following tales of exceptionalism, I use data primarily from the Endurance Company and compound, the largest of the three both spatially and in terms of personnel. The Endurance compound is also where I spent the most time, and where I had the most interviews and interested interlocutors. Before turning to Endurance, however, I’ll briefly describe Major and Smith.

Once inside the secured Major compound—the oldest and smallest of the three—you pass a small helicopter landing pad on manicured grass and come immediately to an office complex and employee parking lot. The of-
Office complex is a series of large buildings housing the country manager’s office and various departments, including accounting, public and government relations, corporate social responsibility, human resources, procurement, drilling, and other offices. Past the office complexes is a second automatic iron gate through which you have to be buzzed again to access the residential area, which includes three parallel streets of two- and three-bedroom Tudor-style suburban townhouses. Each home has a front and back yard, with manicured grass, flowers, and trees tended by Equatoguinean gardeners. The Major compound also includes a pool, a gym, a large multipurpose room (for church services, parties, and other large functions), and a bar/restaurant.

The Smith compound is the only large compound on the mainland, and of the three is located the farthest from the main city (in this case, Bata). One can feel this distance in the layout and aesthetics of the camp. It is by far the most beautiful, surrounded by lush greenery on three sides, and on the fourth it faces a seemingly endless white sand beach that stretches from Gabon to Cameroon, with Equatorial Guinea and the Smith compound in the middle. Catamarans, kayaks, and other water sports equipment linger behind the fence that closes the compound off from the beach, to be checked out from the guard who will also take your name and the time of your departure if you choose to go for a beach walk. (One could easily see this compound turning into vacation homes for the elite, or even something like a ClubMed, when the industry leaves. The all-inclusive aspect is already there!) Like the Major compound, Smith is divided into the office area, the food and recreation area, and the housing area. The luxurious houses border a circular road that encloses a small golf course, and some—including the largest home reserved for the country manager—have ocean views (see figure 1.8). All resident employees are given golf carts to drive around the complex to reach not only their offices, but also the restaurant, pool, game room, and small movie theater.

Because both the Major and Smith Corporations do all their extraction, production, storage, and offloading offshore, the only personnel living in these compounds are the high-level migrant managers who spend most months of the year in Equatorial Guinea, although only for two- to three-year stints. In terms of layout and architecture then, the compounds are relatively small, housing roughly thirty expatriate workers at a given time. The Equatoguineans who work in these compounds—whether as maids, gardeners, or security guards, or in higher positions such as government and community relations—are forbidden to live on the compounds.

The Endurance Corporation has substantial onshore industrial facili-
ties that entail increased onshore labor; thus, the scene that unfolds once past their gates is quite different from the other two. First, one need not even reach the security gate to see one of the two constantly burning, towering gas flares (see figure 1.1). Although this flare was said to burn only when the system was “disrupted,” the flame was constantly burning during my fourteen months of fieldwork in Equatorial Guinea. I never saw it unlit. This flare and other signs of industrial production take up considerable amounts of space within the compound, including a large electricity plant and colossal LNG infrastructure. Thus, rather than a ClubMed, Endurance feels far closer to Por- teous’s (1974) description of a company town, with “the general dominance of the settlement by the physical expressions of economic enterprise, brought about by a close juxtaposition of town and plant” (411). The most significant difference between the Endurance compound and the other two is its housing. While all three companies have extensive subcontracts with firms that stock their offshore operations with employees from around the world, Major and Smith (given their offshore setup) do not have to house these workers in their compounds. Rather, they rotate on and off rigs as discussed in chapter 1. By contrast, the Endurance group of companies, with hundreds of

Figure 2.2. Golf carts on the Smith compound, with management houses in the background.
contracted and subcontracted employees from over thirty countries staffing the methanol and LNG plants, has extensive housing obligations not only for migrant management, but also for mid-level and lower employees who also rotate, but in this case, to and from the onshore plant.

Once past security in the Endurance compound, the entrance to the industrial complex of offices and plant infrastructure sits straight ahead. A left turn at a second guardhouse brings you to another gate where you have to show identification to the guards, who then electronically admit you into the compound’s residential area. Up and over a large hill with majestic ceiba trees and ever-mowed grass, the residential zones partially spread out before you. To the left are the large suburban homes also found within the other compounds, housing upper management, with the largest as always reserved for the country manager and his wife (see figure 2.3). During my fieldwork, it was white Americans, white Brits, and white South Africans who occupied these houses (and job positions). I knew one Brazilian woman, married to an Argentinean man, who lived in this level of the compound. While she considered herself to be white and was considered white by others in Brazil, she made it clear to me that in the compound, the US- and UK-dominant culture made her feel distinctly nonwhite. Two other women—one Filipina and one Thai—married to white American men, rounded out the nonwhite presence that I was aware of in either the large houses or the condominiums for mid-level management. The condominiums are located straight down the hill to the right, overlooking a small man-made lake. Referred to as the “townhouses,” they comprise a smaller set of buildings, equally well-appointed with flat screen televisions, state-of-the-art stackable washer-driers, and new appliances. Most of the mid-level management living in the townhouses were stationed in Equatorial Guinea alone, although some men lived there with their wives as well. While these townhomes were absolutely luxurious and spanking new inside, the wives who lived in these buildings lacked expansive common areas, and hence did not host cards. Housing in the Endurance compound was contentious. The larger houses were all occupied, so some couples who “deserved” larger housing were placed in the condominiums. There was also a feeling that the three subsidiary Endurance companies housed within the compound did not get equal treatment in housing. I explore embodiments and effects of these tensions in the final section of this chapter.

I spent considerable time with “the wives” in their weekly activities and thus came to know their housing facilities well. My own whiteness and (at that time) young womanhood produced a form of white racial sorority, fictive kinship where these women looked at me and often said or seemed to
think, “You could be my daughter.” This raced and gendered kinship opened their homes to me and got me through the considerable layers of security with which the compound is guarded. For a variety of reasons, including my raced and gendered identity, I did not have this level of access to the rotator camp (figure 2.4) or the barracks (figure 2.5). The men who lived in this housing were rotators; thus, when they were not working, they were “home” in the Philippines, Kazakhstan, or Mexico, and not in Equatorial Guinea. When in Equatorial Guinea their work schedules were outrageously demanding; therefore, it was difficult for me to find ways to socialize with them or encounter them outside of work. They were also forbidden from bringing visitors into their housing, thus the description I offer below comes from a series of visits guided by white management personnel with whom I had established a relationship.

The rotator camp is one step below the condominiums in the housing/employment hierarchy. Within the camp are large apartment-building structures where men (exclusively) live, two to a suite, with separate bedrooms and bathrooms, and a shared common room. While still nice, the accommodations are sparse, having more of an institutional/college dormitory
Figure 2.4. Rotator camp.

Figure 2.5. The barracks or “Indian Camp.”
feel. The country manager who led me on the tour of the rotator camp told me that the majority of workers living there were Filipino, but that it housed the most diverse workforce of all housing levels. Others at this occupational level—mid-level engineers, electricians, and plant operators—included men from India and Pakistan, Mexico, Venezuela and Ecuador, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, as well as the US Gulf Coast. (Notice that despite the diversity of nationalities, the men generally hail from oil-producing places.) All men housed in these facilities are subcontracted labor and do not work directly for the Endurance corporation. They are not permitted to bring wives (let alone other partners), despite the fact that some of their rotations are up to one year long. They have no cooking facilities and are expected to eat in the canteen for every meal, although many had hotpots in their common areas.

At the bottom of this residential hierarchy are the barracks, a series of modular dwellings lined up in parallel rows. Before we entered these housing units, the facilities manager explained, “I’ve never been inside these facilities. I think they’re similar to offshore: fairly tight quarters with common areas for relaxation.” With an anxiety that clearly anticipated critique, he told me repeatedly that they were shutting down this housing level, although I saw no sign of the decommissioning. The barracks I visited had long, trailer-wide corridors with doors off of either side leading into shared bedrooms and bathrooms. They had no cooking facilities, and men in this level were also prohibited from bringing partners. Originally constructed to house the workers who built the LNG plant, the vast majority of whom were Indian, many still referred to the barracks as “Indian Camp.” In 2008, the barracks residents were majority Filipino, Indian, and Pakistani. Although clean, the bottom two levels of housing—essentially for semi-skilled and unskilled and mostly nonwhite labor—were far inferior to the top tiers. When I asked the manager giving me the tour why the barracks were so different even from the rotator camp, he explained, “Western rotators are on 28/28s. Their requirements for housing are a little higher standard.” Not only were these housing options obviously inferior to the others, but they also had separate recreational facilities, including a small pool and their own bar. By comparison, the Olympic-size pool in the management residential area was attached to the clubhouse—a more formal dining, recreation, and bar area where mostly white management residents paid for meals should they so choose—and wives could often be found sunning poolside. Nonwhite men away from home for long periods of time were not fully welcome in that rec-
Reational environment. One white North American expat wife told me that she had recently seen some Filipinos coming to “her” gym. “They’re here alone for a year without a break,” she said. “Seeing them in the gym creeped me out.”

I ate in the workers’ canteen (as opposed to the clubhouse) on two occasions, and on both there were multiple menu options advertised by nationality—one day the “American” option was Sloppy Joe; the “international” option was Beef Hot Pot; the “Vietnamese” option was Squid Pakwis; and the “Indian” option was Aloo ka Bharta. Yet of course, multicultural lists of inclusive menu options belie a situation in which men ostensibly divided by skill level are given unequal housing, facilities, and recreational options, not to mention different pay scales, in a hierarchy that falls too neatly along national and racial lines. At the top of this hierarchy are white managers from the US, Western Europe, and (occasionally) South Africa, permitted to bring their wives and given lavish homes and salaries; Filipinos and other workers from the world’s oil-exporting diaspora (Kazakhstan, Mexico, Venezuela) are in the middle, on “rotations” that last up to a year, during which time they are not permitted to bring family, and share dorm-like facilities with fellow workers; at the bottom are Indians, Pakistanis, more Filipinos, and the occasional Nigerian, living in shared trailers. Again, these forms of segregation and differentiation are a clear illustration of the continuity with over a century of oilfield practices, the “long, unbroken legacy of racial hierarchy across the world’s mineral frontiers” (Vitalis 2007, 19). Note, for instance, that while the United States, the United Kingdom, and South Africa (among others) are multiracial societies, over two years of research in Equatorial Guinea, everyone from rig workers to migrant management from these countries were nearly homogeneously white. The only African American man I met in Equatorial Guinea was head of corporate social responsibility for one of the transnational corporations. The only Asian American man I met in Equatorial Guinea managed a smaller oil services company attached to the larger companies by subcontract. I did not meet a single Black or Coloured South African in Equatorial Guinea, though white South Africans were common. This is to say that the forms of racialized hierarchy—and white supremacy in particular—that unevenly organize life in these countries traveled to Equatorial Guinea with the US-based oil and gas industry. While Vitalis (2007) points to the continuity of these corporate practices, one significant piece had changed: Equatoguineans were not allowed to live within the compound.
Some of my Equatoguinean interlocutors, who had lived abroad for most of their lives, received postgraduate degrees, and recently returned to work in the oil industry, had requested to live in the compounds. They argued that their extended families were still abroad, and that they would be uncomfortable in Malabo and not able to work as efficiently as their foreign coworkers without the quality of life to which they were now accustomed, including reliable electricity, potable running water, and adequate housing. They were all denied. When I asked migrant management why Equatoguineans were forbidden to live in the compounds, they responded that allowing Equatoguineans residents would force them to “change the rules.” Migrant managers were open about the fact that the “rules” of the compound allowed them to control not only the comings and goings of their employees with curfews and lockdowns, but also to control the comings and goings of outsiders. If Equatoguineans lived in the compound, then they would want their families and friends to visit, and perhaps spend the night, all of which was currently prohibited. Fundamentally, the compounds were set up to separate, to disentangle, to partition, and to control. Separations, including the prohibition of Equatoguinean residents, contributed to the lived sense that the enclaves were somehow completely detached from the world outside their walls.

Through fourteen months in Equatorial Guinea, I was consistently astounded by the strangeness of the industry’s gated enclaves, by what felt like their horrifically archaic raced and gendered divisions of labor, space, and domestic life. I am obviously at home with running water and cable television, and neither golf carts, Texans, nor gross inequality is new to me. Yet there was something about the sheer concentration of these technosocial arrangements tucked within enclave walls that made me feel ever the anthropologist, constantly wondering what the “locals” would think of next. But my ongoing astonishment was merely historical ignorance. The oil industry, and extractive industries more broadly, have long histories of compound life to which I now turn in order to situate what I have described within longer histories of settler colonialism, company towns, and zonal capitalism.

**HISTORY AND PRECEDENTS**

In his 1931 memoir, an American oil worker living in Venezuela noted, “If ever a white man could live happily with his wife and children in a hot climate, that was in Mene Grande,” a US oil camp in the Maracaibo Basin.
(Coronil 1997). Citing this passage, Coronil writes, “As veritable enclaves with private roads, schools, stores, and medical supplies, these camps constituted a State apart from the Venezuelan State” (109). And a 1946 article from Chevron’s monthly magazine opens with a phonetic introduction: “Sah-oo-dee Ah-ray-bee-ah, where part of America has been set down amidst rock and sand” (Vitalis 2007, 35). Of Dhahran in 1945, the wife of an American colonel brokering a deal with Saudi ARAMCO wrote home: “The oil town . . . is just like a bit of the USA—modern air-conditioned houses, swimming pool, movie theater, etc. Six American wives have already arrived and more are on their way” (Vitalis 2007, 80). Since the 1930s, firms have built “the basic infrastructure that we associate with modern municipalities—housing, streets, power, water, security, and so on—in order to bring their commodity to market” (Vitalis 2007, 266). Transnational extractive industries have long operated in what William Reno (2001) has called a “BYOI” or “Bring Your Own Infrastructure” environment.

Paul—a white Zimbabwean brought to Equatorial Guinea to finish, commission, and run the Smith enclave—narrated these long histories in Africa, in particular:

Within [our company], people say that this compound is one of a kind and that there’s no other complex like this. But they’re wrong. There are lots of these in Africa. Mining has been a huge industry in Africa—diamond, gold, emerald, platinum, and every single mine has a complex like this—larger and more elaborate . . . private game reserves, eighteen-hole golf courses. Shell Nigeria, their whole outlook is different. They have schools with teachers and headmasters and summer trips, wives and children with dad. [Their] complexes have supermarkets.

Indeed, the partitioned use of space has an extensive history across Africa’s resource-rich landscape. Here, through brief thought pieces on colonial settlements, company towns, and more contemporary forms of zonal capitalism, I think through the enclaves’ adjacent forms—histories and precedents of the strategic use of domestic and industrial space. Each spatial form I consider is both strategically and partially integrated into the economies, infrastructures, and populations of their respective locations, and each is intentionally dis-integrated as well. Each form is highly racialized and gendered insofar as those aspects of personhood are central to the organization of labor, living conditions, and freedom of movement.
**Colonial Settlements**

Plantations are self-contained worlds. Workers, managers, and the crops they cultivate live together side by side, but regulated by strict hierarchies, the more blatant because they are carved into the landscape. Male managers and their wives live in comfortable houses with gardens and kitchens maintained by local employees and have access to their own clubs with well-stocked bars and refreshing swimming pools.

—Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*

Enloe’s description of South American plantation life could, in many ways, be today’s oil and gas enclaves in Equatorial Guinea, with oil production replacing crop cultivation (see also McKittrick 2013). The enclaves’ geographies in Equatorial Guinea often trace a direct relationship to the colonial cocoa economy. For instance, to be dropped outside the Endurance compound by taxi, you simply ask the driver to take you to *la planta*. As a cognate with the English word “plant,” asking to go to *la planta* is, in part, asking to be taken to the factory. But in Spanish, *la planta* is also an abbreviated reference to *la plantación*, or the plantation, and the picturesque spit of land on which the massive Endurance compound now sits was, during the colonial era, a large cocoa plantation.

Commercially, colonial (and imperial) extraction brought with it many of the key features still seen in oil enclaves today: private companies with private security, intimately connected to their states of origin; infrastructure set up exclusively for export; and contractual regimes with local power holders guaranteeing special ports and customs areas, or specifying juridical procedures in disputes. As with petroleum, the historical trades in enslaved humans and palm oil were governed by parastatal contractual relationships (Lovejoy and Falola 2003; Mann 2007, 2013). The slave trade, in particular, was so capital intensive that it could only be run by chartered corporations—which operated by means of chartered monopoly, subsidies, and special rights (including the right to wage war) conferred by the British Monarchy.4

Labor setups in colonial and imperial production varied dependent on, among other factors, the requirements of the raw material in question. In the case of labor-intensive crops or extractive processes, such as sugar, rub-
ber, and mining, large labor pools were required; often, large town-like complexes were set up to house workers at all levels, from manual, indentured, or enslaved labor through overseers and plantation managers (Ferguson 1999; Stoler 1989b. See also McKittrick 2013, 2016 for contemporary rereading.)

In Equatorial Guinea, after the slave trade grew dangerous at the beginning of the nineteenth century, trade turned from humans to ivory and palm oil, both needed to lubricate the machines of the industrial revolution. With the end of slavery, a merchant class of English-speaking West Africans from Sierra Leone came to Equatorial Guinea, the first of many waves of people who would come to be called Fernandinos (Liniger-Goumaz 1989, 2000; Creus 1997). Later, Liberians and Nigerians joined them, and together they made up an entrepreneurial and social group, communicating in Pidgin English and shunned by the local Bubis. Undoubtedly motivated by the rapid accumulation taking place, Spain gradually began to reassert nominal imperial control of various kinds. The first Spanish governor arrived in 1858, followed by missionaries (Liniger-Goumaz 1989, 2000). Cocoa was introduced for the first time at the end of the nineteenth century, some argue by a Liberian Fernandino, and Bioko (in particular) began a transformation into a latifundary monoculture (Creus 1997; Liniger-Goumaz 1989). Unlike the export of palm oil or ivory, which required only a comprador class to broker deals with ship merchants, the farming of cocoa was both time and capital intensive. The work to be done and the profits to be had ensured that more European colonists and African Fernandinos began to settle on Bioko island.

The Spanish set up small-scale cacao plantations with houses for local workers, mostly those the Spanish labeled civilizados, who had been converted to Catholicism and worked and lived with their families on the plantation. Because the local population of Bioko Island was so small, the Spanish brought in Nigerians to supplement the labor force, who then grew to become the demographic majority of colonial labor on Equatorial Guinea’s cacao plantations. Nigerians too received houses, although much smaller and of much poorer quality, where they lived as migrant laborers without their families. These graduated domestic arrangements—from white colonial managers and their wives in comfortable housing with luxurious amenities, to mid-level foreign labor in smaller housing, to manual labor in camp-like situations—persist in Equatorial Guinea’s enclave arrangements today.

The Uncle Ben’s Rice, Crystal Light, and Bull’s Eye barbeque sauce that crowded pantry shelves in management housing seem easily analogous to “the inappropriate dress, food, and other markers of European culture that Anthony Burgess and George Orwell caricatured in their novels: the jun-
gle planter sweating through a five-course dinner in formal attire” (Stoler 1989, 149). Yet, there is also something fundamentally different about migrant management lifestyles in Equatorial Guinea’s compounds. Burgess’s and Orwell’s caricature comes across in the sweat, exposing the five-course meal and formal attire as maladapted, insisted upon only as markers of race, class, and other forms of distinction. Among migrant management in contemporary Equatorial Guinea, there is little sweat, literally or figuratively. Down to the telephone area codes, the air-conditioned transport of suburban Houston life into these small enclaves can feel so complete that, until one goes outside, it is difficult to caricature flat screen televisions, running water, or mansions with manicured lawns and maids as absurd.

Stoler (1989) writes that “colonial cultures were never direct translations of European societies planted in the colonies, but unique cultural configurations, homespun creations in which European food, dress, housing and morality were given new political meanings in the particular social order of colonial rule” (136). Much of this insight certainly applies to these enclaves, but “homespun” they are not. The intensification of technologies of transport, communication, and infrastructure since the colonial era guarantees that these enclaves are appointed in ways perhaps less homespun even than these people’s homes in Texas or elsewhere. The furniture is standardized as are the state-of-the art appliances. The compound even has its own voltage setting to accommodate American electrical current. Perhaps the most significant difference from Stoler’s accounts, however, is that in Equatorial Guinea there is no colonial governing apparatus, just the exigencies of the industry. This distinction alone brings us much closer to the model of a company town.

The Company Town

A consideration of company towns highlights other continuities between Equatorial Guinea’s gated compounds and different historical forms of corporate and domestic enclaving across the world’s mineral frontiers. The company town is defined by employees of a single company or group of companies as inhabitants; ownership of the real estate and the houses by those same companies; deliberate residential zoning by nationality/ethnicity and socioeconomic class, including “a small number of luxury dwellings for the attraction and retention of key personnel”; and an elevated level of employee control stemming from the company acting as both landlord and employer (Porteous 1974). As I explore below, only the Endurance compound
in Equatorial Guinea might fruitfully be thought of as a company town. The obligation to house a large number of workers from all over the world makes Endurance unique in Equatorial Guinea, but far more like most other major extractive industry complexes around the world. Specifically, as narrated above, the compound is laid out according to what Porteous (1974) has called “deliberate residential zoning from the outset” (41).

The occupational hierarchy of the plant traditionally has been imposed upon the town by fiat in residential segregation terms. Common elements include (1) deliberate ethnic and socioeconomic segregation in housing location; (2) creation of a graded series of house styles which are allocated to employees not according to need (i.e. family size) but according to class; and (3) creation of separate institutions for each class. (411)

Porteous’s schema is based on his work at three major Anaconda Copper Company towns in Chile’s Atacama Desert, established in 1916 and enduring in a certain form until they were nationalized in 1971. A century after Anaconda’s establishment of these towns, the same deliberate residential zoning processes are visible in Equatorial Guinea’s oil compounds.

Segregated residential zoning is not peculiar to company towns. Most cities and towns in the US and elsewhere are racially segregated, and in turn have drastically different housing styles—from mansions to public housing—“not according to need but according to class,” and, we must add, race. However, the processes that produce the daily segregation in which many of us live—long histories of redlining and gentrification (better referred to as “racial banishment” [see Roy et al. 2016]), immigration, white flight, industrial collapse, and zoning legislation—are often slow and cumulative. While their effects are systemic and visible, the processes themselves are often implicit enough to be naturalized. The segregation in company towns, on the other hand, is premeditated and deliberate. Far from emerging slowly over time, graduated residential options are put in all at once, and workers are assigned to each according to their job and the temporality of their labor, which coincide neatly (although not perfectly) with race, class, nationality, and the attendant inequalities of the global nation-state system.

Like settler colonialism, the company town model is not historically static. On the contrary, its long and violent history of labor unrest and rebellion, in particular, has meant that companies continually rethink how best to set up their domestic-industrial space. This ongoing rethinking has led to significant differences between the classic company town model—with schools, post offices, and churches, for instance—and what we find today in
Equatorial Guinea. Take Ferguson’s (2006) description of company towns on the colonial Zambian copperbelt, which he deliberately contrasts with more contemporary forms in what he calls the “Angola model” of oil development:

On the Zambian copperbelt, investment in copper mining brought the construction of vast “company towns” for some 100,000 workers. . . . The mining towns, classic examples of colonial-era corporate paternalism, eventually came to include not only company-provided housing, schools, and hospitals, but even social workers, recreational amenities such as movie theaters and sports clubs and domestic education programs. (197)

Paul, the Zimbabwean in charge of the Smith camp quoted earlier in this chapter, commented that older oil compounds in Nigeria have “schools with teachers and headmasters and summer trips, wives and children with dad. [Their] complexes have supermarkets.” Porteous’s description of Atacama towns, Ferguson’s of Zambia, and Paul’s of earlier Nigerian oil camps all betray the dynamism of modes of extraction, management of labor, and, with them, company town design. Towns that grew up around both the Atacama mines and the Zambian copperbelt depended first on the idea that the company would be in the region for a long time and second on the need to employ and house thousands of local workers. On the one hand, the temporality of oil in relatively low-producing supply sites like Equatorial Guinea is such that long-term investment in institutions doesn’t make sense from an oil company’s perspective. But on the other hand, as Paul’s comparison with Nigeria shows, there is also the iterability of the transnational oil industry; that is, US oil companies have learned from the failures of institution-building in Nigeria (Watts 2004; Zalik 2004, 2009; Adunbi 2015), and they are investing differently in places like Angola and Equatorial Guinea (Ferguson 2006). In Equatorial Guinea, again, the locals who work in the industry are prohibited from living in the enclaves, and the migrant workers who live in the enclaves, regardless of level, are prohibited from bringing their children. These, among other regulations, leave a small and transient population as enclave inhabitants, no more connected to living in Equatorial Guinea than they were to their postings in Angola, Indonesia, or Russia before that.

Company towns are perhaps most (in)famous for the tension between proffering comfortable living conditions in extractive settings on the one hand, while intimately controlling labor and domestic life on the other. Starting with the town of Pullman, Illinois, in the late nineteenth century, company towns have long been based on “progressive concepts of management and labor relations administered by trained professionals. In order to
deter unionization and reduce labor turnover, the ‘new’ company town attempted to attract workers by providing significantly better working and living conditions” (Crawford 1995, 3). In other words, invoking the recurring theme of self-regulation, company towns rely on a specific relationship between capital and labor, in which workers’ living conditions become a matter not of potential industrial conflict, but of company regulation, as Porteous (1974) explains:

Company housing has proved an effective means of worker control where an entire company town is constructed. If the industrialist is landlord as well as employer, his relationship with his employees extends beyond the plant and into the workers’ homes. Employers may thus exert considerable influence over the social and political, as well as the economic life of company towns, sometimes with dire results. . . . Union organization may be prevented, religious bigotry fostered, and social class structures fossilized; dissenters and “radicals” may be dismissed from their jobs, and consequently from their homes and thus from the company town itself. Such excesses, including a lurid history of strike suppression in the cola and copper towns of the American west, in Chile, and elsewhere, have been the basis for the notoriously poor public image of the company town. (410)

Extraction and production in Equatorial Guinea are happening at a conjunctural moment when, in both industry history and Equatoguinean history, active or intentional union deterrence is superfluous. The structure of labor evidenced in both the offshore and in these enclaves—subcontracting to innumerable companies through “body shops” that draw men from Venezuela to Turkmenistan, Pakistan to the Philippines, rotating in and out on hitches of various lengths—now practically ensures that unionization isn’t an option. Moreover, de jure, unions are illegal in Equatorial Guinea (Campos Serrano and Micó Abogo 2006). In other words, since Pullman, Atacama, and even Nigeria’s earlier oil boom, much has changed in the setup and temporality of labor, and in how migrant oil workers relate to their “homes.” And yet, the ability of companies to intimately shape the lives of employees in company towns has not changed. In Equatorial Guinea’s enclaves, residents have curfews, and nonresident circulation is closely monitored; residents cannot paint their homes or tend their own yards; and only a privileged few are allowed to bring their heteronormative spouse to the country.

While colonial settlements and company towns draw attention to the long histories of cohabitation of industrial production and domesticity still to be found today in Equatorial Guinea’s oil enclaves, those precedents don’t
capture the privileged fiscal and juridical statuses of these ring-fenced areas. There is a final category that Winters (1996) calls “zonal capitalism” through which to consider the enclaves, to grasp the full extent of their exceptional juridical and fiscal status in relation to the nation-state in which they can be found.

**ZONAL CAPITALISM**

Zonal capitalism [is] a special economic zone in a subnational area—sometimes walled but always clearly bounded—in which an intensified effort has been made to create a climate favorable to business. Government policies within and for the zone tend to diverge markedly from those applying generally to the national jurisdiction.

—Jeffrey A. Winters, *Power in Motion: Capital Mobility and the Indonesian State*

Special economic zones come in various forms: Export Processing Zones (EPZs), Free Zones, maquiladoras, and Special Autonomous Zones, among others. Intimately related to the broadly conceived offshore discussed in chapter 1, within these spaces companies are often “freed” from national laws regarding taxation, labor rights, and environmental regulation. The means of production also are freed from state involvement; for example, companies are permitted the duty-free import of equipment, materials, machinery, supplies, and components, using global procurement chains that stretch around the world (Sklair 1993; MacLachlan and Aguilar 1998; Cameron and Palan 2004). With reference to the ways in which corporate sovereignty supersedes national sovereignty within these spaces, Palan (2006) has called this use of space “sovereign bifurcation,” and Ong (2006) “postdevelopmentalism,” to refer to “a more dispersed strategy that does not treat the national territory as a uniform public space [but instead favors] the fragmentation of national space into various noncontiguous zones” (Ong 2006, 77).

For both Winters (1996) and Ong, zonal capitalism and postdevelopmentalism are state strategies to attract nomadic capital. Taking Indonesia and China as their respective sites, their theorizations rely on an idea of the state as strong and tactical, intentionally ring-fencing parts of their territory in which they can rescind labor laws and attenuate taxation regimes in an effort to draw foreign investment. In Equatorial Guinea, on the other hand, prof-
itable hydrocarbon discoveries can hardly be said to have been state strategies. As Ferguson (2006) and Reno (2001) have pointed out, despite the axiom that African states, in particular, must demonstrate a certain business climate—such as good governance and transparency—to attract Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), Nigeria, Angola, Equatorial Guinea, and Sudan, among others, show that the geologic presence of hydrocarbon deposits alone is sufficient to attract abundant FDI, even in the midst of civil wars, ethnic cleansings, widespread civilian unrest, and deep kleptocracy. In these contexts, the enclave is hardly a state strategy, but rather an oil company strategy through which the industry attempts to “shield” its practices from what may lie outside its walls. In this way, enclaves in Equatorial Guinea may have less in common with noncontiguous zones in China, and more in common with the relationship between small Caribbean economies and offshore finance (Maurer 2005, 2008; Navarro 2010; Hudson 2017a), where historical hierarchies of rank and the state’s marginalization are, in fact, what guide the enclaving process. As with small Caribbean tax havens, the impunity that oil companies enjoy inside Equatorial Guinea’s enclaves has less to do with the state’s position at the cutting edge of capitalism, and more with its earlier abjection therefrom.

Finally, Ong (2006) has pointed out that “these zones [are a] confluence of economic freedom and political repression” (113). Despite other differences, Equatorial Guinea and China certainly share this effect of variegated sovereignty. Although Equatoguinean life outside the enclave walls—with armed soldiers dotting the streets, tanks parked visibly in strategic locations, and military helicopters often buzzing overhead—feels more militarized than the enclaves themselves, the potential for armed response within the enclaves is palpable, if latent. The compounds were frequently “locked down” in response to perceived geopolitical unrest, whether local, in Nigeria or Cameroon, or along various borders. In addition to these forms of overt control of circulation and the policing of boundaries, the political repression in these spaces suffused the texture of daily life in more mundane ways, as I have described above—from regulations on what you can and cannot do to your house, to the clear backpacks issued to Equatoguinean workers; and from strict guidelines about visitors, children, and partners, to the differential treatment of citizens and noncitizens in terms of rights and privileges within these spaces. “Preexisting ethnoracializing schemes (installed under colonial rule) are reinforced and crosscut by new ways of governing that differentially value populations according to market calculations” (Ong 2006, 79). The relationships among national and racial hierarchies, profit, domes-
ticity, and the built environment come together in novel ways in Equatorial Guinea’s oil enclaves. They contain, at once, centuries of continuity with settler colonial patterns, the iterative antipolitics planning of company towns, and newer forms of noncontiguous political life in which nation-states refract into policed communities of variegated, racialized sovereignties and profit potentials.

Equatorial Guinea’s enclaves are novel in another way, in that, despite narratives of progressive corporate learning and late capitalist flexibility (from full employees to subcontractors, from company towns to special economic/domestic zones), securitized compounds are not inevitable. Indeed, in major extraction sites around the world, many large US oil companies house workers at all levels “in the community.” In the next section, I explore why major US oil companies chose the compound model in Equatorial Guinea, making an argument for the “actuarial” enclave. This is an infrastructural form haunted by past uprisings and built to avoid a set of potentialities—in illness, graft, political unrest—which, if they were to materialize, would ultimately be more expensive than the enclave built at great expense to avoid them. This is cost-benefit analysis as ghost story, capitalism as a calculative palimpsest of white fear and the making of a frontier.

**Actuarial Enclaves:**
**Frontier-Making and Ring-Fencing**

Wendy and I sat on the screened back patio of her home on the Endurance compound. With her large suburban-style house perched on the very edge of Punta Europa, the spacious patio offered an expansive view over the ocean inlet that separated the Endurance compound from Malabo. The city was low and visible through the heated haze just across the water, as if a mirage. Wendy had been coming in and out of Equatorial Guinea with her husband since 1999, by far the longest of any of the migrant wives I came to know. She reminisced that her husband had come to Equatorial Guinea originally in 1998 on a “reci,” or reconnaissance mission for his oil company. She came with him in 1999 on a “look-see,” to determine if the place was a viable living and working option for them after other lengthy migrant stints (as Brits) in Ecuador, Indonesia, Texas, and Los Angeles. As she explained:

We came out to where we were going to live, just to take a look at the project. The project was here. It was actually on this spot, because they had a gas flare. They had a gas discovery and … that flare has been there since 1990, since the
discovery. The original flare was massive. It actually lit up the sky. There were very little lights around here. Nothing existed. This was jungle, total jungle. So we just saw the whole thing develop. This, where we are now, where we’re sitting now, on the peninsula, was jungle, and we chose this spot. [My husband] went on a “reci,” you know, he actually did a reconnaissance mission. He actually walked through the jungle to see whether it would be suitable to start building houses, and where they would build the plant.

Part of the lore of company towns has long been the idea of remoteness, captured in Wendy’s description: “Nothing existed. This was jungle, total jungle.” Porteous (1974) writes that “most commonly, the company town comes into being through the overwhelming physical fact of isolation. The pioneering entrepreneur, endeavoring to develop a resource in a region remote from established population centers, is likely to find a dearth of speculative builders, local governments capable of providing housing, or workers with the capital or skills necessary for dwelling construction. The company town is thus typical of remote resource frontier regions” (410). In Wendy’s narrative, we hear not only about geographic isolation, but also of Porteous’s “pioneering entrepreneur,” her husband who “actually walked through the jungle” to determine where they might start building houses. Enloe (1990) has also written about this masculinized and most often white character in military bases and plantation economies around the world, where a “rough and rugged cohort of men [transform] the primeval forest into a civilized and profitable plantation belt” (140). Their bravery and ruggedness are crucial in this narrative, where “privilege and profit are [justified via] character and not on race or class” (141). (See also Stoler 2010.) But as is so often the case, the physical isolation or remoteness that Wendy conjures is not what it seems.

Not only is the Endurance compound separated from the capital city by a mere handful of kilometers, but the land itself, Punta Europa (Europe Point), is an exquisitely beautiful and perfectly situated isthmus that had been a Spanish-owned cacao plantation in the colonial era. Along with most of Equatorial Guinea’s plantations, it fell into disuse after Macías expelled the Spanish. Although its Spanish owner attempted to reclaim it under the bienes abandonados (abandoned property) act at the beginning of Obiang’s rule, he was unable to do so, and Obiang then claimed the property as his own. The first contract for oil-related infrastructure development on Punta Europa—the contract that produced the gas flare “that lit up the sky”—was between Endurance’s predecessor company and Obiang, to whom they paid rent as a private property owner. During the second phase of Endurance’s
major expansion, when the company forced the displacement of small communities living on the isthmus, Obiang made a large and public display that the state was “expropriating him too,” as he officially sold his property to the government (of which he was, and is, the president). Rather than a company town established in a remote area, at its beginnings the Punta Europa compound was more accurately Tsing’s (2005) “zone of unmapping. . . . Frontiers aren’t just discovered at the edge; they are projects in making geographical and temporal experience” (29). In Punta Europa, there were already long histories of ownership, cultivation, and dispossession underfoot, although Wendy narrates her family’s early experiences as reconnaissance missions in empty jungle. At the same time, however, it is difficult to suggest that she might have done otherwise.

The overgrown cacao plantations that dot Bioko Island quite reasonably look like “jungle” to those unfamiliar with the landscape, with second-growth tropical flora creating dense shade. Only those with a practiced eye, like the Equatoguineans who walked me through second-growth elsewhere, might know that the cocoa pods deepening from yellow to orange, or the easily walkable routes through the trees with no machete needed, indicate histories of cultivation and inhabitation over the last century. Obiang’s ownership of the land, on the other hand, was a widely known fact, albeit one that made most migrant industry managers somewhat uncomfortable—that their presence was enriching a dictator in the most direct and intimate ways—while most Equatoguineans rolled their eyes in bored resignation, accustomed to the complicity.

While Wendy and other early migrant arrivals waited for the compound to be built, they lived in Malabo, as she describes here:

We settled into Caracolas [an affluent residential community]. The housing accommodation was basic, [but] very, very nice. It was all Spanish so it was beautiful and it had the facilities, but it needed updating. Everything was really quite old. It had to be rewired and the water was really bad. We had lots of remodeling to do. We settled into the house there, and most of my life was in town. There was a very large cultural community. I played tennis with the French. We used to go out to beaches. We used to do a lot of things, but in a multicultural group—Spanish, French, Belgian; we had people from Brazil.

Indeed, Equatoguineans remembered that when oil first arrived, “Americans were all over the city. Now you hardly see them.” Wendy was clearly nostalgic for this time—the freedom of movement and the national (although note, not racial) diversity of the migrant community with whom she socialized.
As Wendy’s brief time in Caracolas illustrates, the construction of these enclaves was not inevitable, at least according to my migrant informants, many of whom were closely involved in the decision-making processes that led to this spatial arrangement. As the country manager for Regal Energy noted, “In Ecuador and Vietnam [migrant employees] live in the community. In China they congregate you in expat housing. Tunisia we lived in the community. Israel we lived in the community. Here it’s unique, this [enclave] school.” Others I spoke with had lived “in the community” in places as disparate as Gabon, Indonesia, Ireland, and Japan; however, “in the community” is a slippery designation. While migrant employees in Gabon or Indonesia weren’t as isolated from local life or public infrastructure as they are in Equatorial Guinea, in all places they were offered “western-style” housing with separate water and electricity sources, if necessary, in gated and securitized compounds.

When I talked with people involved in the decision-making that led to compound construction in Equatorial Guinea, they consistently responded with a narrative pair: on the one hand, the difficulty and expense of the endeavor; on the other, a sense of having no alternative. As a finance manager I spoke with explained:

There were two schools of thought when we first came here: one wanted to live in the community and force the issue. Others said no, we need to build a place where people are willing to come and work. I don’t know which way is right. [It’s] a business decision: it makes more sense to live in the community. It’s cheaper if you can live in the community and shop in the places where local people shop. It makes financial sense from a business standpoint. So the pressure in that regard is internal. You’ve gotta get your project done; you’ve gotta get the personnel; you’ve got the realities on the ground to deal with. If we find some very nice housing for expats in Paraiso [another affluent neighborhood in Malabo], from the outside it looks really nice. But the wiring is really messed up and the residents get shocked. The well has chloroform because it was built too close. . . . It’s not to the standard that we’re accustomed to.

The man quoted above claimed that “it makes more sense to live in the community” because it’s less expensive to rent already-built housing and shop where local people shop. The pressure to enclave then is not simple economic pressure, but what he referred to as “internal” pressure. Enclaving, in his estimation and that of all other managers with whom I spoke, facilitated a
more focused work environment, attracted people who might not otherwise be willing to work in Equatorial Guinea, and prevented contact with “realities on the ground,” which included everything from chloroform in the drinking water, to unpredictable electricity, to volatile regional politics that had the industry constantly uneasy about “Nigerian” unrest.

Ferguson (2006) has argued that this enclaved model, in which food and other industry needs are imported, has the benefit of “low overhead”; its efficiency is almost frictionless or deterritorialized insofar as it avoids local involvement altogether. On the contrary, as the finance manager above intimates, the complex processes necessary to materialize the disentanglements of this model are far more expensive and logistically involved than the alternatives. But the idea is that this strategy avoids a set of potentialities—illness, graft, involvement in political unrest—which, if they were to materialize, would be more expensive to contain than the enclave built at great expense to avoid them. Enclaves are, in this way, actuarial: calculating potential future risks and attempting to insure against them in the present. As one manager put it, “We have people out there working on wells that cost $30, $40, $50 million. If they have an upset stomach and they’re not thinking about work, a $30 million problem turns into $100 million. So we try to ensure that everything works, the maid service, everything, because the repercussions, the knock-on effect, is magnified.” For enclave administrators, the enclaves are about keeping the focus on the project at hand: drilling for oil. For them, the predictability, health, and control that the “self-contained” compounds offer allow workers to keep their minds on $30 million problems instead of upset stomachs or the frustration of a late local delivery.

Provisioning enclaves to ensure these outcomes is to work incessantly and at great expense toward building separations. Of the Smith facility, Paul explained:

Opening a facility like this takes twelve months. [We had] teething problems: generators black out, the incinerator wouldn’t work. Potable water wasn’t really potable. We had to modify filtration systems, massive problems with AC. The camp was designed by an American company in Houston and this isn’t Houston, this is Africa. It has its own relative humidity, its own dew point. But now this camp is completely self-contained. Electricity, water, sewage, [we] handle our own garbage, incinerate it all here. The bulk of our food comes from Houston. We ship it all in because it’s cheaper and the quality is good, and it eliminated the need to deal with a highly inefficient local economy. We spend $150 million a year [in the local economy], but in a manner
that doesn’t negatively impact efficiency offshore. [Our] social development program [is] 100 percent local content.

After a long year in which a Danish construction company, along with Spanish, Portuguese, Icelandic, and Greenlandic journeymen, plus eight hundred temporarily employed Bata residents, built the camp according to a Houston-based design, it is now, according to Paul, “completely self-contained.” The provision of electricity, water, sewage, garbage disposal, and even food is systematized to serve those within the walls, and, in his telling, independent from those systems outside the walls. That this provision of resources relies on infrastructure outside the compound walls—roads, seaports, airports—does not, in Paul’s telling, detract from the compound’s self-sufficiency. The effect, instead, is to “eliminate the need to deal with a highly inefficient local economy.” Facilitated by this idea of separation, the only relationship Paul sees with the outside world is the $150 million per year spent “in the local economy” on corporate social responsibility programs. Corporate social responsibility becomes the detached way in which oil companies can intervene, from the other side of the wall, redoubling the effect that they are somehow separate, but willing to “help” those on the “outside” (Shever 2012; Rajak 2011; Welker 2014).

Paul’s idea that it is cheaper to import food from Houston (and Europe in some cases) is, at face value, shocking and seemingly untenable. Donald’s wife Cheryl explained to me the logistics of their “food drops”:

Fruits and vegetables and milk are flown in from Europe so that we’re guaranteed that we get nutritious food and are able to eat well. Twice a year, frozen meats are brought in and put in a container. I can place an order for meat items that I might need. I do that once every two months based on how much I get so that I can cook and make my menus. I do go into town. I have not bought any of their fresh produce or milk. But I will purchase cereals and olive oils and tinned things, and the American or European products that I’m familiar with. Their interest on the compound is making sure that we are given food items that are cleaned and unspoiled so that we omit a lot of illness. That’s another reason for the compound: continuous work without ill health issues.

The procurement procedures Cheryl described were in place for all three compounds, although practiced differently in each. In the Major compound, for instance, residents did not receive regular shipments of fresh produce, but ate mostly canned vegetables or local (Cameroonian) vegetables pur-
chased by the intrepid few in town. This was a source of tension and jealousy between the Endurance wives and the Major wives, the latter of whom were resentful of the Endurance wives’ produce deliveries. Wives in the two compounds often traded various pantry items for imported produce items, a trade they oddly had to keep secret, as it was—in some arcane version of anticorruption practices—considered against company policy. Wives from the Major compound often used the tidbit that they didn’t receive fresh vegetable shipments as proof that they weren’t as spoiled as the Endurance wives and that they were “roughing it” slightly more.

The rationale for importing food was one of the questions I routinely asked my informants, not only those in procurement or management positions within oil companies, but also relevant Equatoguinean authorities and farmers as well, including one farmer whom I often accompanied on food drops to the compounds. Their answers displayed a remarkable consonance around the undesirability of importing food, but the impossibility of sourcing it locally. In an early conversation with Donald, I speculated that perhaps food import had to do with the industry being offshore. “It doesn’t have anything to do with onshore or offshore industry” he responded:

People want to know why we’re not supporting gardens and farms, why we import food. [Agriculture is] not our business. We could set up a group that helped people to plant, but that takes energy from the organization to do things that aren’t core. If we could get milk and juice and fresh vegetables locally we would. In Russia, the only thing we brought in from the outside were highly technical pieces of equipment that we couldn’t buy locally.

Equatorial Guinea does not have industrialized agriculture, let alone a meat or dairy industry. Boats come daily from Kribi, Cameroon, into Malabo’s port to stock the markets with produce staples, including tomatoes, onions, and peanuts. While companies have secured a handful of “local content” contracts with small farmers to bring in local produce, the quantity and regularity of the deliveries does not meet the US-standard needs of resident employees. Thus, as Donald explains it, in order to source local food, the industry would have to get involved in subsidizing and fomenting local agriculture—“setting up a group that helped people plant”—and they’re not interested in doing that. Another manager, clearly aggravated by my question, responded: “There is this song and dance about local content. Where are the people that can do the services we need? We don’t take food into Ecuador and Vietnam, or any other place we’ve ever worked. You purchase it locally. We bring it in here because it’s not available.” Local farmers read-
ily admitted their inability to fulfill the scale of food needs the US industry presented, and lamented the absence of systematized agricultural support from the government. Equatoguinean state officials I spoke with agreed that importing food was the companies’ only option. As one of them explained:

If your country can produce those things, they will be bought from the local economy. Equatorial Guinea does not produce things consumed in e.g. In Nigeria you buy everything [in Nigeria] to put food on the platform. When we get self-sufficient here in food and foodstuff, we will not need to go to Cameroon to buy tomatoes or potatoes. It’s not because the platform is offshore. If the industry were onshore, you would still get it from Cameroon. That’s what you eat here.

And yet of course, while Equatoguineans eat Cameroonian produce, oil industry personnel, by and large, do not. While importing from Cameroon would be cheaper, it would also entangle companies in ongoing border tensions and disputes, which routinely cut off supplies of fresh vegetables from Cameroon for days and, less frequently, weeks at a time. The use of duty-free imports and private ports ensures that materials shipped from the United States or Europe experience less friction, or at the very least, that the friction they might encounter can more easily be framed as technical supply chain disruptions, rather than entanglements in central African politics. It is to these corporate ring-fencing mechanisms of privileged tax and transport statuses, among others, that I now turn.

CORPORATE RING-FENCING

It was 9:50 a.m. on a Malabo Monday morning. I had been sitting in the office of the Secretary General of the Ministry of Mines, Industry, and Energy (Mmie) for fifty minutes, waiting for a 9:00 a.m. meeting to begin. In front of me, one secretary mouse-clicked at a computer game absentmindedly while another read the bible. In a room to the right, a third secretary clicked away at her mouse at the same rate, perhaps playing the same game. Their desks were empty, save the computers; three desks without a visible piece of paper, file folder, or pen. These women seemed to have nothing to do, at least according to my own understanding of office work. The Secretary General seemed to have no formal schedule (as I’m sure he didn’t remember telling me to meet him at 9:00 a.m.), and these women certainly didn’t seem to be keeping one for him. As people came in and out of the office, one of the secretaries would simply say that the Secretary General had not arrived. Beyond
that, it was unclear what work, if any, these women were entrusted with. Here I was in the all-important Ministry of Mines, and the action at 10:00 a.m. on a Monday morning was three secretaries chatting in Fang and clicking away at computer games. The building itself, a ragged ten-story apartment building constructed by a Lebanese company, was essentially empty. As you climbed the stairs floor by floor, outdated concession maps dotted the walls here and there; but in general, it felt like a big, dark building (electricity was often out) with empty offices and the occasional piece of office furniture, often still wrapped in plastic. Although the ministry was soon to move into a brand-new glass skyscraper in Malabo II, the emptiness was not because the action had already moved. That’s how the MME had been since I had first seen it two years before. In fact, the plastic plaques on the walls of each floor, listing whose offices were where, were an improvement over the water-stained paper printouts pinned on each landing when I first arrived in 2006.

The confusing emptiness of the MME offices was in sharp contrast to the more familiar office environs within the compounds of US oil companies: large buildings with open floor plans, crowded with cubicles and swivel office chairs; walls covered with graphs, charts, and posters, as well as company slogans and achievements; enormous white board calendars and schedules filled in with uncannily legible handwriting; office desks and shelving crowded with stacks of paper, books, labeled binders, file cabinets, computers, printers, and fax machines; the thrum of phones and photocopying; and the hustle and bustle to and fro between personalized work spaces, with photos of families, inspirational quotes, and sports team memorabilia.

And yet, in addition to the Presidency, the Ministry of Mines was considered to be Equatorial Guinea’s most powerful and effective Ministry. Locals and foreigners alike often extolled its highly trained personnel and bureaucratic presence in industry processes, often in contrast to GEPetrol (the relatively new national oil company), whose mission was still ill-defined to the point of mystery. I share the contrasting office-life descriptions here to draw attention both to how different the working life of the industry feels on either side of the wall and to the kinds of work rhythms enabled by infrastructures like reliable electricity and running water, which could be found only within the US company compounds.

The infrastructures that enable constant electricity, wireless internet, running water, and Houston area codes are clearly not only for the domestic comfort of migrant employees and their spouses, but also enable the movement of oil and gas to market in more legibly business-oriented ways. Con-
sidered in their commercial capacity, these enclaves enclose separate business practices, ranging from the use of satellites that allow Houston phone numbers in offices; to differential laws, regulations, and taxation regimes; to variegated citizenship rights and responsibilities; and finally to the infrastructure itself—private, duty-free ports, electricity grids, and telecommunications systems. Justifications for these separate business practices stretch beyond arguments for efficiency and profit maximization. The companies also point to the ostensible ring fence within which they operate as spatial and procedural proof that they are separate from the “corruption” outside their walls. “In effect, a border is expected to be established between the oil industry, which now seeks to demonstrate that it is governed according to global standards, and the local economy and society, which lie outside these borders” (Barry 2006, 246). Corporate processes “within” the enclave cloak themselves in discursive and procedural regimes of the global, the standard, the compliant, and the objective, to be differentiated from the arbitrary, the personalistic, and the incomprehensibly local beyond their walls.

Political scientist William Reno (2001) has gone so far as to say that “the private enclave exploitation of resources is a salutary imposition of market discipline and standards of efficiency on corrupt economies. Foreign firms, especially larger ones, offer short-term prospects of filling in for missing state capacity” (4). To the contrary, I would suggest that the enclave is precisely a performance of market discipline and standards of efficiency, crafted through spatial, technical, and embodied differentiations that serve as semiotic proxies (Ho 2016) for “the market” and its ostensible standardizations. Like any felicitous performance, these practices create sociomaterial effects in the world; in this case, oil and gas from Equatorial Guinea reaching global markets with remarkable reliability. At the same time, however, the relationship between the enclave’s segregated infrastructure and these effects is not causal, as the industry (or Reno) would suggest, but instead mediated by those thick, sticky entanglements with local life that the enclave claims to avoid. The enclave then is a procedural stage for market terms—efficiency, standardization, depersonalization—while the actual processes that get oil to market have everything to do with socialities, compromises, and often political force. One can hear this layering in a Smith’s country manager’s explanation of the exceptional status his company enjoyed in Equatorial Guinea:

There’s so much revenue generated. Corruption and inefficiency exist in spades in West Africa. The fact that we generate so much revenue, we have
direct contacts in [the Ministry of Mines, Industry and Energy] and tremendous influence. If there are difficulties—[given our] $700,000 per day [rig] rental—negative impact by customs, immigration, [we are] able to make a few phone calls and it gets cleared away.

This man intimates that zonal capitalism is made through deep and personalistic entanglements with that from which it claims to be separate. “We make a few phone calls and it gets cleared away.” We use our global, compliant standards to call our highly placed connections at the Ministry of Mines and ask them to please call the lowly customs official who is holding our needed technology at the port and tell him to snap out of it. This is how we differentiate ourselves from the “corruption that exists in spades in West Africa.” Thus, while Barry (2006) is right that “the formation of technological zones has become critical to the constitution of a distinction between global/Western political and economic forms, and their non-Western others” (250), the work of making that distinction cannot be characterized by separation alone. It must also include the onomatopoetic Spanish word that locals used most often to explain the relationship between the oil industry and local power structures: compinchados, or accomplices. As one Equatoguinean lawyer put it:

Obiang gives the companies free rein, and in turn they protect his regime. [The companies] operate on the margins of local law, but it doesn’t affect them. This theme of having their own telecommunications system, it guarantees that the government cannot interfere. This is on the margins of current legality and of the country’s interests. They are commercial relations in which the industry closes its eyes to what is obviously illegal according to international law in order to do business with the regime. . . . The government has tacitly renounced control of the activities of these companies. As they renounce control, company activities damage the interests of the population. In environmental protection there is not a single control. The damage that they do—to the coast, the pollution—it reaches our beaches and the government doesn’t have a single mechanism, there isn’t the political will. . . . The fishermen feel abandoned, and the government does nothing.

This man narrates the deep ties and complicities between oil companies and those in power—from the state’s granting of corporate sovereignty within the enclaves, to the companies turning a willful blind eye to blatant illegalities. And yet, the effects to which Barry and Reno point are pervasive—the performation of a border between the industry and the economy and society thought to be “outside” it (Barry 2006), and an idea of the imposition of mar-
ket discipline (Reno 2001). The needed technology rapidly clears customs at the port, and the company can claim that they have sidestepped the corrupt outside yet again. Despite the sticky entanglements through which it is made, this infrastructural separation allows the consequential inhabitation of a partition, wherein companies are “imposing market discipline” from behind the walls, paragons of legal and economic liberalism. The separation is a spatial and procedural stage on which companies enact removal from and superiority to the legal, environmental, political, and financial situations in which they are causally and irrevocably implicated.

Another aspect of the ring-fence model—or the story told about it—is the extent to which these companies are “tightly integrated with the head offices of multinational corporations and metropolitan centers but sharply walled off from their own national societies” (Ferguson 2006, 203). While it is difficult to argue that Equatorial Guinea is the “national society” for any of the companies in question, their tight integration with head offices in Houston is unquestionable. Their phone systems, internet, and email are all connected and operated via satellite between Houston and New York. Every lobby and many offices of US firms in Equatorial Guinea have two clocks adjacent on the wall—one set to Houston time and the other to Malabo time. Daily working life for most employees who work in the offices is also Houston-centered. As one migrant IT manager explained, “A lot of the people in this building don’t deal outside these walls. The nationals [Guineans] are 50/50. In many cases they just deal with Houston. Our logistics people—drivers, movement of materials—they deal a fair bit with the outside.”

It is not only Houston that becomes a central reference. Rather, Equatorial Guinea becomes a node in a much wider oil-producing diaspora connected by supply chain logistics, mobile infrastructures, procurement procedures, and shared technologies (Barry 2006). In discussing his job, Smith’s information technology manager explained that he delivered technology to “every company office—Indonesia, Africa, Russia—sixteen different countries.” Smith’s finance manager told me a similar story about her job. Having worked previously in Dubai and Jakarta, she explained:

Smith’s reporting procedures are standardized worldwide. It’s not very different. There are set rules and policies we have to follow. Government reporting is slightly different place to place, but what I do—company accounts—are the same. And the more locations there are, the more things are the same in every single location. The company is really trying to standardize. So eg, in terms of reporting, is the same as any other location.
Houston-centric working life, including globally standardized IT systems and company financial reporting, indeed serve to ring-fence corporations. But again, I would suggest that the level on which this ring-fencing works is procedural, gaining its effects through the performativity of ritual—a performance (Mol 2002). In other words, that Smith’s reporting procedures are standardized worldwide is itself the consequential and performative fact. That the contents of those reports, and even the methods through which they are completed, may vary widely does not dim the effect or felicity of apparent standardization, integral to the disentanglement of the ring-fence model.

The performance and invocation of standardized, “global” procedures work to smooth the lived, messy entanglements that characterize even the most mundane details of ring-fenced work. “We do get [preferential treatment] on our major stuff. [But] there are always other issues—registration of cars, residency permits, licenses—that you struggle through,” as one country manager explained.

We spend $850,000 per year on licenses and residency permits. One of the big issues starting to hamper our work [is the] process for visa attainment: requiring police checks for guys from the UK. [The Equatoguinean state now asks for] a certified letter from the local constable. You can’t have outstanding warrants or a history of crime. [So now the] whole process takes longer, but even after the process you have people’s visas denied with no explanation. So we just finished a two-week turnaround where we shut down the plant and wanted to bring in specialists. One specialty company that we wanted to bring in, none were given visas.

While nearly $1 million spent on registrations, permits, and working visas was a drop in the bucket to both the oil companies and the Equatoguinean government as a yearly expenditure or receipt, seemingly banal bureaucratic forms like car registrations, residency permits, and licenses are in fact analytically rich. Particular sticking points—visas in this case—reveal much about what worked smoothly in the enclaves, what didn’t, and why. The visa issue this informant identified as emerging in 2008 is not simple red tape. Instead, in the wake of a failed 2004 coup attempt in Equatorial Guinea that implicated Mark Thatcher, among other geopolitical luminaries (Roberts 2006), the Equatoguinean government grew increasingly wary of who they let into the country. While Spaniards, as the ex-colonial power, had long struggled to acquire visas, most other European foreigners did not. However, the coup and its aftermath laid bare for the Equatoguinean state the long
history of personnel exchange between international militaries, mercenaries, private security companies, and the extractive industries. A brief professional biography of Simon Mann, accused of being the coup plot leader, illustrates the point.

White South African Simon Mann had served in the Gulf War before he returned to work in the oil industry in Canada. In 1993, when the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) fighters closed oil installations in Angola, President dos Santos brought in Executive Outcomes, a private military security firm in South Africa (now defunct), who contracted Mann and others to fight. This circulation between private military contracting companies—soldiers for hire in wars both declared and undeclared—and the extractive industries is common. To sharpen the point, the defense Mann and others offered of their apparent coup attempt in Equatorial Guinea was to say that they were, in fact, flying to the Democratic Republic of Congo to provide security at a diamond mine (Roberts 2006). Thus, with Mann’s extradition, trial, and jail time in Equatorial Guinea, and even before, the Equatoguinean government became increasingly savvy about the intimate ties between the extractive industries and the defense/security industries. Many of the foreign men I met in the field shared these biographies, including Paul (the white Zimbabwean discussed above), who was arrested and interrogated in the wake of the coup, and the head of security for Regal Energy, who was recently back from Iraq where he had served as J. Paul Bremer’s bodyguard. Once Simon Mann was released from prison in Equatorial Guinea, Obiang contracted him as a defense and intelligence expert.

Another company logistics manager, quoted below, ran into similar, seemingly trivial entanglements that show the extent to which supply chains are, in fact, chains of or proxies for exchange translations along the rails of geopolitics (Tsing 2015).

We have LOI [letter of invitation] issues. They’re trying to get a technician here from Genoa, Italy, to work on the machine, but we don’t get our LOIs nearly as fast as Chinese or Arabs. They present the red envelope. We are prohibited from doing that. [Our employees] know if they do that, they won’t get reimbursed, because they’re going officially. So the LOIs drag out. Literally one week later Endurance gets the LOI; [the expert] will be here tomorrow. During this whole period I estimate the lost revenues in the $15 million gross range for the government’s take alone. I can guarantee you that Endurance has pulled out all stops, putting pressure on their people, but things don’t move like that here.
In this man’s story, we see significant revenue loss from seemingly banal visa and LOI issues that stem from the geopolitics of mercenaries, coups, and oil. This informant also brings up “the red envelope.” He claims that the Chinese and the Arabs (referring to Arab Contractors, an Egyptian parastatal) bribe officials to get letters of invitation and other bureaucratic red tape taken care of more quickly. As we saw in chapter 1, US-based migrant informants who worked for large American companies claimed repeatedly that in the wake of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA), the Enron scandal, and Sarbanes-Oxley legislation, they simply could not offer bribes in that way, even if it previously had been standard practice in the industry. Nevertheless, major transnational Chinese and Egyptian companies—mostly in Equatorial Guinea for construction-, road-, and port-building projects—were widely known to operate under a different set of circumstances and guidelines.

Chinese and Egyptian companies—and indeed, French and Spanish ones—were also heavily invested in Equatorial Guinea’s booming hydrocarbon economy. While in-depth ethnographic knowledge of these companies’ practices was outside the scope of my research, word on the street and in the ministries—among Equatoguineans—was that these companies did business in different ways than the Americans, at least in terms of quotidian interactions. I do not doubt, for example, that many Chinese or Egyptian companies often paid a fee for an expedited letter of invitation. An Egyptian friend living in Equatorial Guinea and working for a major construction firm confirmed for me the regularity of these practices in his company. Nor do I doubt that at this level of trivial proceduralism, American companies tended not to present red envelopes. In this difference, I would like to suggest, it is not a coincidence that American companies were enclaved, while these other companies were not. The performative separation of the enclave and the refusal to give a red envelope for trivial matters were enactments of procedural disentanglement intended to frame out the profound implications of US firms in Equatoguinean life. Akin to needing three signatures to tie one’s shoe, or to the regulations that prohibited wives from trading pantry items and produce, the scale and depth of US company entanglements in local life renders pitiful the refusal to pay a $5,000 bribe.

In the remainder of this chapter, I examine how the enclaves’ most profound effects arguably emerge not from procedures of zonal capitalism traditionally conceived, but instead from the embodied experiences of seclusion, racialized social separation, and control that enclaves produce on both sides of the wall. Starting from the feminist argument that the domestic arrangements are not private matters, but political and economic affairs that act
to sharpen or mute specific practices in the search for profit (Wynter 1982, 2003; Enloe 1990; Federici 1998; Yanagisako 2002; Stoler 2002; Bear et al. 2015; Hoang 2015), I offer a brief discussion of lived separation before closing the chapter with an exploration of the ways in which “the wives’” presence shaped company involvement with, separation from, and boundary-making between their compounds and the outside.

ON LIVED SEPARATION

Back in the Ministry of Mines. At 10:20 a.m., a Chinese businessman walked in with his Equatoguinean liaison. The Guinean spoke in Fang to the secretary, saying that they had an appointment. He then spoke in fluent Mandarin, I assume telling the Chinese man that the Secretary General wasn’t yet in the office. They sat down next to me to wait, and we started talking. The Equatoguinean man had studied in China for five years, and he read, wrote, and spoke fluent Mandarin. The Chinese businessman gave me his card from the China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC), and I gave him mine, from Stanford University. Speaking English and Spanish, he explained the Equatoguinean oil industry as high risk but high reward, especially given that prices were so high. We talked about Stanford, and how he would like to study psychology and philosophy. We talked about the Olympic opening ceremonies that had just taken place in Beijing. As we chatted, we both overheard the secretary telling another visitor that the Secretary General would travel to Nigeria that day at 11 or 12; maybe he wouldn’t come into the office at all. But at 10:41, we got word that he was on his way.

After meeting briefly with the CNOOC representative and his Guinean liaison, the Secretary General welcomed me into his office. Among other questions, I asked, “What does the average Equatoguinean know about the oil industry?” And “What does the rotator from Texas know about Equatorial Guinea?” I quote his response at some length:

This question, it could be a theme of professional debate. Unfortunately, I am not a sociologist. We have lamented precisely this situation many times. At the cultural level we (Equatoguineans) are hospitable, peaceful people who know how to integrate among ourselves and with others. It’s possible that this Guinean character trait—the ability to integrate—has not been able to be noticed from the cultural point of view, perhaps because we have such a small population. We can look at the typical example—the Major Corporation—in the same city but fortified, and no one leaves. Despite the fact that many jog
in the streets, they don’t stop. . . . I would say that a form of business discipline has been imposed, one that requires specific behaviors for those who come to work in the petroleum industry in Equatorial Guinea: singular dedication to work. I refer to the exclusive attention to the [work-related] tasks necessary to achieve success in a relatively unknown environment. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that this discipline imposed by the norms of the company collides with the social values of man, the sociability of man. [This discipline is] creating a space of isolation, of exemption. The people exempt themselves . . . and why not? Those who come learn from those who are already here. There has to be much more human interaction to avoid differences, a consolidation of interpersonal exchange. These people need to open themselves. It could improve the relationships.

The Secretary General’s explanation of the enclaved spaces was compellingly resonant with those given by expatriate company managers. The managers suggested that the enclaves—with imported food and stable infrastructure—were necessary to ensure that the work got done, that $10 million wells weren’t made into $30 million problems by upset stomachs. The Secretary General states it more plainly: the foreign men who work in Equatorial Guinea have been told to come and work, not to stop and chat with Guineans while jogging. He suggests that companies have decided that this exclusive dedication to work is what will ensure “success in a relatively unknown environment.” This success comes at a price, however, as dedication to work forecloses other forms of sociality, and the foreigners isolate themselves from the peaceful, accommodating Guineans.

Responding to a similar question, Mauricio—an Equatoguinean functionary in the Ministry of Finance who had also worked for the Major Corporation for years before transitioning into government—echoed the Secretary General’s ideas of isolation and partition, stating of the migrant workers that they don’t “pick up social views” very well:

They don’t live in Malabo. They live in Houston. In [the Major Corporation] we even used to have rules in terms of when you go out and when you come back home [to the compound]. You can’t keep company in compound, guys or girls . . . You’re not going to pick up good social views, realistic social views, from the Major Compound or the Endurance Compound. They’re never outside of that compound unless they’re on the bus to the airport.

While the amount of time that expatriate employees spent outside of their compounds for personal/recreational purposes varied, there was definitely
a common refrain among US and European single male rotators I talked to: “I rarely if ever go out in public. From the rig to the office. I’ve rotated into Equatorial Guinea for six years and I’ve probably spent thirty nights in Malabo. I’ve maybe gone out for dinner twelve times. I’ve not taken advantage of opportunities to mingle with the culture. One of my [Guinean employees] says he’s disappointed I’ve never come to his house for dinner.” Or another:

I live here like I did in Angola. From the airport to the rig. In Angola there was a civil war. Some people like going into town. I want to eat my dinner here and go to sleep. In two years in Bata, I’ve been out to dinner one time. In Aberdeen [we were] part of the culture. In China, it’s not a camp situation. I spent time in the city. But I didn’t go out a lot. But that’s just me. There have been those that partake of the nightlife in Bata, which is discouraged. [There was] one guy who couldn’t ever make it back to camp the same night, and they moved him offshore.

In this man’s account, to “partake of the nightlife” is a euphemism for engaging with sex workers. This man talks about a “type” of man he defines himself against, a man who—whether in China, Equatorial Guinea, or Angola—likes to “go out a lot.” Certainly, there are many men in the oil industry in Equatorial Guinea who meet Guinean women and offer them money, meals in restaurants, and sometimes even more stable arrangements of housing and a living allowance in exchange for companionship and sex. In an effort to constrain this behavior, the large compounds at issue in this chapter all have curfews, ostensibly for security and to ensure a well-rested worker in the morning; but certainly this is also a way to control alcohol consumption and sex, two of the main attractions outside compound walls. Who can and cannot bring wives to the compounds becomes more salient here. The apparent morality and dignity of white upper management is propped up by their domestic arrangement that either keeps them home at night or encourages them to socialize with other married white couples in luxurious housing. As Povinelli (2006) writes: “The intimate couple is a key transfer point between, on the one hand, liberal imaginaries of contractual economics, politics, and sociality, and, the other, liberal forms of power in the contemporary world. Love, as an intimate event, secures the self-evident good of social institutions, social distributions of life and death, and social responsibilities for these institutions and distributions. If you want to locate the hegemonic home of liberal logics and aspirations, look to love in settler colonies” (17). By contrast, nonmanagement migrant workers—the vast ma-
jority of whom are men and not white—away from home, alone, for up to a year at a time, are more likely to leave their claustrophobic compound housing after work. (Remember from the earlier descriptions that they have no kitchens or living room areas, and live in dorm-style or trailer-wide facilities.) Given that many of these workers are also from the global South, Equatorial Guinea “beyond the walls” is far less exotic or threatening to them, and many enjoy the opportunity to frequent bars and nightclubs beyond the gaze of their bosses, whether or not they engage with sex workers or long-term companions. Notice too that for men who can’t make it back to camp before the curfew, an offshore posting is a punishment, further racializing questions of work and sexual morality.

The enclave and its outside are intensely gendered spaces in which sexuality and kinship—who was frequenting sex workers; who could or could not have wives with them—became entangled in labor control and hierarchies of privilege. The wives, however, inhabited these regulations and hierarchies differently, and segregation both outside and inside the walls took on different meanings and potentialities for them than it did for their husbands and other male workers.

THE WIVES

The wives of migrant managers were my easiest informal entry into the industry early in my fieldwork. Many pitied me: “You live in the city? Don’t you want to take a shower?” They invited me to cards on Wednesdays, mahjong on Tuesdays, and stitching on Thursdays. They also invited me to present a seminar on “Women in Africa,” and later to offer a workshop on understanding opera as part of their ongoing series of “master classes” presented by women for women living in the compound. I received invitations as a friend, translator, or mere tagalong to their charity drives and to outings in the city or around the island. They invited me to potlucks to say goodbye to various women—one leaving for a new post with her husband in Kazakhstan, another retiring with her husband to a lake house in Wisconsin, and another heading back to Texas. When I left the field, they threw me a potluck of my own.

I played Continental with them every Wednesday afternoon. Chat over the game would turn to predictable questions. “What did you do before?” At my table of card players on one afternoon, there was one woman who had been a tennis pro, one who had been a banker, and another who had a degree
in recreation and had led a YWCA. Another woman’s father had died when she was young, and she was left to take care of her mother. She explained softly that she didn’t get the chance to earn a college degree, and she was clearly self-conscious about losing at cards. Other women I came to know had degrees in law enforcement and police administration, library science, nursing, education, sociology and psychology, and fashion and interior design. Others had a high school education. Many were gifted artists; one was a jeweler. All of them were in Equatorial Guinea to support their husbands in what was widely acknowledged to be an egregiously work-intensive environment. Reminiscing about her own career, Scarlett explained, “Oh, I’ve worked in retail; as a secretary; been a mom; wife and professional volunteer. I never got to pursue my dreams. In my late thirties and early forties, I grieved the loss of that. I’ve had a wonderful life. We’ve been corporate nomads.” Sarah, who had worked as a nurse, explained, “I can get a job anywhere. [My husband] does appreciate that I could be at home working, with an identity more or less. I gave that up, and he never takes it for granted.”

We would eat Doritos and m&ms, salads and sandwiches, meringue and chocolate cake. If one wife ran low on something, she would trade with another, Crystal Light for coffee beans. As various wives prepared to leave Equatorial Guinea permanently, each would sell off the contents of her pantry: Stove Top stuffing, Campbell’s soup, Grape-Nuts, marshmallows, graham crackers, Uncle Ben’s rice, hot chocolate mix, canned beans and beets, and chili. I bought a box full of groceries at one sale, and the wife who was leaving quoted me a price in US dollars as “the same amount that I paid,” to assure me she was not making a profit. Because all three companies forbid expatriate workers from bringing children to Equatorial Guinea (for reasons that ranged from malaria, to lack of adequate schooling, to “security concerns”), the women I met were mostly in their fifties and early sixties, dearly missing children in their twenties and beyond at home. They were from New York City; Savannah, Georgia; Ipswich and London, England; Ogden, Utah; Conroe and Georgetown and Houston, Texas; rural Louisiana; and the Midwest. There was one Thai woman married to an American, one Brazilian married to an Argentine, and one white South African woman who had moved to Equatorial Guinea from Bonnie Island, Nigeria, where she had been posted with her husband in the industry and opened a chicken chain. Nearly all of them had lived in Texas with the industry, and among them they had also been posted in Angola, Argentina, Ecuador, England, Gabon, Indonesia, Ireland, Japan, Nigeria, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and throughout the American Gulf Coast.
They were accustomed to expatriate life and its particular rhythms, its comings and goings. The woman leaving for Kazakhstan went for a “look-see,” to find out what she would need there and what types of clothes she should bring. We spoke after she returned to Equatorial Guinea to pack up her house for good and, referring to an earlier conversation we’d had, she said, “You know, it’s just like we were talking about. There’s a whole subculture there ready to show me where to change money, wives calling me ready to pick me up.” Despite all the moving, the constant new faces and places, there was a patchy transnational continuity to migrant management life. The “wives” in any given place had most often lived in many other places and were accustomed not only to the transience of this existence, but also to its peculiar durabilities and continuities, including already-established communities of migrant wives. Chief among these peculiar durabilities are postcolonial meanings attached to whiteness, and the political potency of the heteronormative and deeply gendered nuclear family structure. “The Expat Wives’ Prayer” (figure 2.6) is a poignant and troubling artifact of these continuities, given to me by one of the migrant women with whom I worked in Equatorial Guinea. The poem is a satirical reinterpretation of the Lord’s Prayer that circulates broadly in expatriate communities the world over, on the internet, and in Equatorial Guinea, although the woman who gave me this copy was clearly ashamed to do so.

The poem is saturated with gendered, raced, and classed relationships, implicitly laid across the global north and south. White property—excess baggage, houses, treasures, duty free; relations of white dominance and nonwhite subordination—cooks, maids, drivers, gardeners; and a collective whiteness seeking “divine guidance in our way of doing things” (emphasis, tellingly, in original) are all arrayed against “the natives” who the Lord is called upon to help “love us . . . for what we are, and not for what we appear to be worth.” In thinking through this poem, first I want to recognize white supremacy by Ansley’s (1989) definition: “a political, economic, and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority are widespread, and relations of white dominance and nonwhite subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings” (1024). Second, I want to recognize the centrality of racialized sexuality and propriety to the place of white womanhood in the long history of global capitalist projects (Hoang 2015; Stoler 2010): “Keep our husbands from comparing us to foreign women. Save them from making fools of themselves in nightclubs and please, Lord, do not forgive them their trespasses for they
The Expat Wives’ Prayer

Heavenly Father,

look down on us, your blessed and humble expat wives
following our loved ones through their working lives,
travelling this earth to lands unknown.

We beseech You, Lord,
to see that our plane is not hijacked,
our luggage is not lost or pillaged,
and our overweight baggage goes unnoticed.

Give us divine guidance
in our selection of houses, cooks, maids, drivers and gardeners.

We pray that the telephone works, the roof doesn’t leak,
the power cuts are few and the rats and cockroaches fewer.

Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from weevils,
give us this day our daily bread—of traffic jams.

Lord, please lead us to good, inexpensive restaurants
where wine is included in the meal—not dysentery.

Have mercy on us, Lord, if it be the latter:
make us fleet of foot to make it on time,
and strong of knee in case we have to squat.

Give us wisdom
to tip in currencies not yet understood.

Help the natives love us Lord, for what we are.
and not for what we appear to be worth.

Grant us the strength to smile at our maids
over shrunken laundry and broken treasures,
remembering our own mistakes in mental matters.

Give us divine patience when we again explain our way of doing things.

Almighty Father,

keep our husbands from comparing us to foreign women.
Save them from making fools of themselves in night clubs
and please, Lord,
do not forgive them their trespasses
for they know exactly what they do.

Forgive us our expensive treats at Duty Free, for our flesh is weak.
Dear God, protect us from bargains we do need or can’t afford.

And lastly Lord,
when our expat years are over, grant us the favor
of finding friends who will look at our photographs
and listen to our stories
so our lives as Expat Wives
will not have been in vain.

Amen.
know exactly what they do.” The “natives” are in one moment the expat wives’ cooks and maids, and in the next, “foreign women” against whom they compare unfavorably, and with whom their husbands should not be forgiven for having extramarital sex.

In the penultimate line of the poem, the author capitalizes “Expat Wives” for the first time, as she hopes for friends at the end of her nomadic life with whom to share her many memories, photos, and stories “so our lives as Expat Wives will not have been in vain.” This line suggests that wedded domesticity itself—providing emotional and housework support to a husband through his corporate journeys—is not enough to redeem the hardships and sacrifices of this kind of life for women. In the sadness of this line, in the sentiment of lives lived in vain, one can hear Scarlett again: “I never got to pursue my dreams. In my late thirties and early forties I grieved the loss of that.” In other words, the de facto white supremacy and the class mobility that can come with these postings—women, many with a high school education, living in luxurious houses with maids and gardeners on a 75 percent uplift salary—create a profoundly ambivalent lived experience, full of contradiction, guilt, and grief. Fear, physical and emotional vulnerability, and conflicted relationships to material possessions and “native” peoples braid with the poem’s invocations of quotidian white supremacy. These affective ambivalences saturated women’s daily lives in the compound, as the end of this chapter will detail, and they betray how these women wrestle with the availability of preexisting systems of raced and gendered inequality to capitalist projects.

The intimately unequal domesticities of race, class, and gender expressed in the poem, and the repetition of domestic segregation in oil compounds around the world, show us how the US-based transnational oil and gas industry draws on preexisting systems of raced and gendered inequality, not simply on norms and technologies of liberal capitalism. Or, rather, raced and gendered inequality are norms and technologies of liberal capitalism. From subcontracting and body shops that pay workers according to their nation of origin, to the flags of convenience that allow offshore rigs to sail under the Liberian flag, to the acceptability of residential segregation, many of the quotidian practices that constitute the licit life of capitalism depend on the reliability of already existing inequalities. “No firm has to personally invent patriarchy, colonialism, war, racism, or imprisonment, yet each of these is privileged in supply chain labor mobilization” (Tsing 2009, 151). Consider Nigel Thrift’s (2005) assertion that “capitalism can be performative only because of the many means of producing stable repetition which are now avail-
able to it and constitute its routine base” (3). While Thrift is nodding toward infrastructure here, the stability of race and gender iniquities—*in all their lived ambivalence*—is also more and less consistently available to capitalist projects and, thus, constitute their routine base (Robinson 1983; Yanagisako 2002; Hoang 2015; Hudson 2017a). However, the affective experience of those iniquities—even for those whose intersectional identities place them at the apex of race and class, if not gender, hierarchies—is deeply troubled. Among the wives, “living in vain” came up often.10

In every interview and questionnaire, I asked the women what they would change about their lives in Equatorial Guinea. Nearly without exception, they wished to know more about the country, understand more, learn to speak Spanish. “I would like to have the opportunity to get to know Guinean people. It’s as if you come here, you pass through the place, and you don’t learn anything. It’s like living in vain. Rather than losing this time, I would like to have more Guinean friends, more exchange.” As was the case in the poem, here again wedded domesticity is not enough to redeem the sacrifices of gendered migrant life. Where the poem’s narrator yearned for friends with whom to share photographs and stories once her world travel ended, the majority of the migrant wives I interviewed and came to know well in Equatorial Guinea yearned for a more fulfilling life outside the compound, *outside* the walled boundaries of conjugal conscription.

Philanthropic projects of various types offered the most readily available and acceptable method to access this outside. Indeed, the phrase “men are out for prostitutes and bars, women are out for charity” was a widely circulated platitude in the compounds. While no wife had been in Equatorial Guinea longer than three years at a stretch, there were charity projects that had been going constantly since 2000. New wives coming in picked up where others had left off. As Chris left for Kazakhstan, she could rest assured that her art and English classes, her program with Jet Air and the local Catholic nuns, and her milk program would continue. And when she arrived in the North Sea, she would pick up the projects of others. While their husbands were up to their eyeballs in work, and enjoyed an open bar, deluxe gym facilities, and American cable TV in every home at the end of the day to unwind, the women were bored for the most part and filled their time with all kinds of activities both within and outside the compound. They were often more involved in and knowledgeable about life outside the walls than many of their husbands.

Many of the women living in the Major and Endurance compounds were
involved in charitable, philanthropic, and educational projects, which were officially separate from the corporate social responsibility programs of the companies, the largest of which were subcontracted to multinational development contractors. Through a sympathetic airline employee at London’s Gatwick Airport, the wives brought in large containers of materials—school supplies, toiletries, toys, clothes—and distributed them in Bioko’s small, mostly Bubi villages of Moeri, Basacato, Riaba, and Baney, often working through nuns in churches and schools. They hosted game days for local children, and also taught art, English, and stitching classes, occasionally hosted in their homes on the compound, although more often at local schools. They helped to run a summer school for teenagers in Ela Nguema that focused on hotel management, cooking, and welding classes. They also hosted fundraisers and donated the proceeds to local school building projects or for the purchase of a generator.

Yet, for all this activity, nearly without exception, from the most fervent participants in charitable work to those who chose only to give money occasionally, if at all, the women had profoundly ambivalent feelings about their presence in and relationship to Equatoguinean communities. As one woman told me:

I will donate things, but I don’t want to be center stage. To be perfectly honest, I feel like it’s a dog and pony show where you go and pass out one pencil. The pencil-passing embarrasses the hell out of me. I’d rather help them paint a house instead of coming all dressed up like I just had a shower and hand out stuff. I don’t know where that comes from. I don’t want to feel like the great white savior. For me, I’d rather be in the background. I don’t think you can save the world. I think you work one person at a time. And I hate when the camera comes out. Oh lord! To be perfectly honest, sometimes I’m embarrassed. We have so much. I’d rather go into a school on a regular basis and help. Give something of myself, maybe? I’ve volunteered in one of the schools in Nyu Bili. I volunteered in the [company’s] computer lab with trainees teaching computer-based math and science programs. I really enjoyed that.

Madalena, the Brazilian woman living in the Endurance compound, had equally ambivalent feelings that she openly narrated in terms of colonialism and race, which set her descriptions apart. When first coming to Equatorial Guinea she had volunteered in a local clinic as a nurse, but she left due to the resentment she felt from the Equatoguinean nurses, which she attributed to
their “racist” attitudes toward white people and to a perceived threat that she would take over their jobs. After quitting in frustration, she preferred to stay at home in the compound. As she described it:

The [charity] projects? No. I’ll donate money, but orphanages? No. I’ll donate, but not go. “Here come the white people who take our petroleum money and come to give us pencils!” It’s like colonialism—they take all the land and then give a gun or a calculator. I feel shame that I don’t participate, but I would rather be in my house. What I like about living here is the comfort and economic things. I didn’t come here to do volunteer work. We came to make money.

When I asked Madalena if she enjoyed leaving the compound at all, she replied: “Oh, I love it! We go to friends’ houses. But to do as the Americans do, to go here and there buying crafts? I don’t like that. I think they see it as exotic, to leave the compound and all. I don’t go because it stinks.” As she waved her hand in front of her face, she lowered her voice and leaned in, indicating that she was worried her Equatoguinean maid would hear her (as we were conducting the interview in a mix of Spanish and Portuguese). “The times that I have gone into town, I felt ill because of the heat and the smell of trash. I like crafts, but because of dust and trash I’ll spend the whole day ill. And, because of social class distinctions in Brazil, this isn’t exotic to me. Poverty doesn’t choke me up. But what does choke me up is that the people here seem hostile. ‘What are you doing here, whitey?’ And they have the right to feel this way, because of the Spanish.”

Again, we come to the affective ambivalences of these women’s lives. They hoped that “more exchange” with Equatoguinean people would give meaning to their migrant existence, perhaps even afford more Guinean friends. But in practice, charity work outside the compounds produced a confused grappling with the contradictions of Equatorial Guinea’s petro-project, which brought vast wealth to a few (including them) and dispossession, environmental degradation, and retrenched political repression to many. While these are not the terms in which the wives articulated their struggles, their embarrassment about pencil passing and invocations of the “white savior,” and, clearly, Madalena’s historical analysis of the continuities with colonialism, all show that they grappled in their own embodied ways with the contradictions of postcolonial racial capitalism. That philanthropy and volunteer work, in particular, generated so much confusion is revelatory. Enclaved life spatialized politics and interaction, so that philanthropy became, on the one hand, among the only accepted and permitted means of
“reaching across the wall.” But, on the other hand, it also became a series of ruptural experiences in which radical inequality, race, and colonial histories blipped into uncomfortable, embodied presence.

In my conversations and interviews with wives, and in questionnaires I distributed and they completed on their own, their yearning for more connection with “the outside”—Equatorial Guinea and Equatoguineans—was not a yearning to do more charity projects. Rather, their stated yearning was most often to learn Spanish, to make Guinean friends, and by extension, to be able to circulate more freely outside the compound. Women living in the Endurance compound were forbidden from driving company or private cars outside the enclave, and women associated with all three major companies were forbidden from taking public transportation, including taxis, which greatly limited their range of motion and meant that when they did leave the compounds, they often did so in large groups on company buses. As one woman explained to me:

We can’t have cars—we have to be on buses as a spectacle. Everyone’s staring. It looks weird. We go in as a pile of people, and it’s embarrassing. You can’t be a good ambassador for your country. . . . I don’t know if a lot of the women are self-conscious, but I know I am. They’re loud. . . . You’re completely associated with whoever you’re with, but you don’t sometimes approve of the way they’re acting. It’s a tour group, and you’re grouped in.

Women’s movements were tightly controlled, and when they were able to move beyond compound walls, it was often as a conspicuous and, to many, embarrassing white group. Without language skills, or a physical presence beyond the walls that was able to transcend spectacle, the women’s desires for more personal forms of connection remained thwarted. But note too, in this woman’s account of her embarrassment at the spectacle of a bus full of white women, the tensions she experiences are tensions between the women on the bus. It is other women who embarrass her (they’re loud), and it is differential privileges between women affiliated with different companies (we can’t have cars) that frustrate her.

For migrant wives living in Equatorial Guinea, homosociality within the compounds, within the apparently homogenous whiteness of management wives, was deeply crosscut by multiple forms of difference, inequality, and prejudice. These included, but were not limited to, nationality (Americans are loud, Brits are uptight); class and social capital (who had education, who was rural); differences between company policies and hierarchies within the companies themselves (who was married to whom, whose husband was
whose husband’s boss). In other words, on the whole, the women generally felt that there was nowhere comfortable to turn. Wedded domesticity in Equatorial Guinea was insufficient; reaching outside the compound via charity projects was fraught; and their relationships to one another were riven with tension and judgment. In this feeling of having nowhere to affectively rest, the compounds’ luxurious infrastructure and the wildly inflated salaries paid to their husbands would often become, somewhat ironically, the least problematic psychic space. Remember the sentiments expressed by Madalena who, although she had originally volunteered as a nurse, renounced that start completely: “What I like about living here is the comfort and economic things. I didn’t come here to do volunteer work. We came to make money.” But this too was an ambivalent position.

For migrant wives in Equatorial Guinea, this ambivalence expressed itself as love of luxurious infrastructure and comfort on the one hand, and resentment and feeling caged by that same infrastructure on the other. They were thankful for the security and comfort the compound provided. Many explained that had there not been a compound, they would have been unwilling to come to Equatorial Guinea. Many wives also readily admitted that the comfort of the compounds bled into luxury; for example: “We’re totally spoiled. Fabulous food, it’s a life of leisure. We’re taken care of with housekeepers and gardeners. It’s a quality of life similar to the US, except that you socialize more because there’s nothing else to do.” For many women, this luxury extended to what they were able to do as they found ways to fill their time. One woman offered a particularly whimsical assortment of personal activities that kept her busy on the compound: “keeping fit, oil painting, printmaking, playing flute and small pipes, walking the dog, knitting and sewing, learning French, reading French novels, writing, different cultures, people watching, day dreaming, keeping in touch with friends and family, acupuncture, socializing.” And yet, these feelings of security and comfort, luxury, and expansive free time were also bound up with guilt and the feeling of being judged, as one woman expressed:

I love the greenery all around us. I love the fantastic houses and facilities. More than anything, I love the quiet. I feel protected. You feel like you’re in the United States, and that’s what the enclaves are for, so that the expatriates can feel like they’re at home. But then when I talk to expats who live in Malabo, they say, “Of course you like living here! You live in Disney World!” They are jealous. It’s as if we have to feel guilty for living well. You have to excuse yourself for living well here.
And another:

When I moved in, the woman who lived in this house before me said, “This is the best prison you’ll ever live in.” It’s almost embarrassingly nice. When you go into town and you see the abject poverty and then you come back here. . . . I mean I don’t want to live in a dump, but it doesn’t have to be over the top.

In our conversations and interviews, and in responses to survey questions, the wives repeatedly described their experiences in the compounds using metaphors of prisons, fishbowls, and microscopes. Interestingly, however, they attributed their confinement and agitation not primarily to a threatening outside, but to the internal social divisions that I described above—between Americans and Brits; between those with and without college educations; and between those whose husbands occupied different levels of the corporate hierarchy. As Suzanne explained, “It’s simple. Interacting with local people is rewarding. Interacting with other wives is frustrating.” Or as another wife put it perceptibly to me, “Everyone feels as if she is on the outside.” Below I offer a sampling of these sentiments, culled from what could have been an entire book about isolation and social distinction among women living in the compounds:

It can be a lonely place. Everyone’s in their homes, and you don’t want to disturb them. You feel eyes are watching you. When you go out, you feel others are watching you. When you're sitting by the pool, you feel people are watching you. “Oh, I saw you walking yesterday. I saw you playing tennis. Who were you playing with?” I’m guilty of this as well. I’ll say, “I really would’ve liked to play tennis. Why didn’t you call me?” A lot of ladies feel left out. I feel left out.

You’re under a microscope. It’s an artificial life. If I lived back in Houston, I would not see the wives on a daily basis or on a frequent basis. Seeing the same people all the time is a little . . . I like ‘em but that wouldn’t be the way it would be if we were in the real world.

There is a prominent difference in our compound between Brits and Americans. People go toward who they feel comfortable with, more so now than before because there are many Americans and fewer Brits. It gets very loud, so noisy. We Brits are less vocal. We’re quieter as a nation; we don’t express ourselves.

There is a cultural difference. The rift is about the ones who have not had college education. For me to mix with those ladies, they’re not sure of me.
People are paranoid, on the verge of hysteria. We’re not one big happy family essentially. Human nature, health issues, menopause, all those things are within the equation.

Finally, regarding another common complaint about internal divisions in the compounds, a woman explained that “there are women whose husbands are managers and they feel more important. I have lived this in many countries.” And, from the other side of that sentiment, a production manager’s wife (the highest possible in-country position) talked to me about her peculiar position as “the pastor’s wife”:

I enjoy the infrastructure: water, electricity, telephone, internet, air conditioning. I never have to be lonely. But when you want privacy, it can be suffocating. There are women in the compound who like to know what everyone is doing. And there is some prestige attached to being the production manager’s wife. People manipulate that relationship. So I don’t like the lack of privacy, or people making assumptions, or having my behavior monitored. There’s pressure to be the pastor’s wife.

The wives also shared ways in which their migrant experiences in Equatorial Guinea and elsewhere had changed them. In particular, many articulated various moments of personal and intersubjective insight, whether about “culture” broadly conceived, race, or personal ignorance; for example: “The best thing that happens is the widening of my eyes, the re-seeing. It’s the softening toward other people and other cultures.” And another stated, “I was never ‘American’ until I got to Gabon. I was also never ‘white.’” Still another woman explained her opinions on the “awful things” Chinese oil companies were doing to the local environment. “They’re educated, don’t get me wrong,” she said. “But I don’t think they care about the people and the environment like we [Americans] do.” After that blunt judgment of an entire nation, she paused, and then chuckled, clearly at herself. “Maybe that’s my arrogance coming out. Now you’ll see how ignorant I was: When I moved to [my first overseas posting in] England, I thought I was moving to a third world country. Growing up in the US, I wasn’t that interested in learning about the world.” This reckoning with personal ignorance, and with the hermetic geographies of quotidian American exceptionalism, was also a common theme. Here is Cheryl, Donald’s wife, for whom a posting in Equatorial Guinea came after long postings in Russia and Japan:

I told myself years ago I would never live in Africa. I would never come here because of the bugs and the diseases and all that. Never. EG would pop up
every now and then in our previous years. I would think, “Oh forever more, no.” I am never going there. When [my husband] came home I said no, I am not going there. Knowing that there was a Western-style compound, once I started thinking about it and had to make a real decision and think and choose, it was, OK, I can do that. And then it was, I’ll have nothing to do. I’ll be on a compound. But I got over that too. But then I thought I’ll collect all my projects and come. I planned to keep myself happy, and I’ll figure it out once I get there. I’ve come to Africa having never wanted to come here. Africa is malaria. Africa is bugs. Africa is those things that get in your clothes and eat into your skin, and National Geographic pictures, and things you read when you were a child. I just never wanted to go there. But I had the same reaction when he said Russia. Immediately, when he said Russia, I said no. I can’t go there. We’ll have to stand in bread lines. It’s what you’ve learned previously that’s not true in real life.

And finally, during negotiations with a woman to see if she would let me read a collection of detailed letters she had written home to family and friends in England, she acquiesced on one condition: “Provided that you understand that my views are not fixed and will change over time, and that I am striving to understand relationships and cultures here and how that reflects my own culture and beliefs.” Whether or not this was a caveat strategically intended to please the anthropologist, it is important to me to take this provision seriously. In sharing their guilt, ambivalence, and frustrations with me, the women presented themselves as whole persons—not corporate nor domestic automatons—feeling their way through the deep compromises and multiple hypocrisies that racial and gendered capitalism entails.

The women in their “golden cages” perched atop Equatorial Guinea’s historic cacao plantations felt lonely, confined, and stuck in various forms of social tension and distance, not only with the Equatoguineans beyond the walls, but even more so between one another. Designed to partition, separate, and disentangle the oil industry from the place in which it happened to be operating, the enclaves also seemed to intensify the social partitions that divided these women one from the other by class, nationality, and education, leaving them resigned neither to humanitarian concerns nor lifelong friendships, but, as Madalena put it, to making money and getting out.
CONCLUSION

Solon T. Kimball was an anthropologist at Columbia Teacher’s College. In 1955, the Arab American Oil Company (now Saudi Aramco) invited him to participate in a summer institute for teachers in Saudi Arabia, after which, unbidden by the company, he wrote a paper on his impressions entitled “Section of Anthropology: American Culture in Saudi Arabia” (Kimball 1956). Quoting from Kimball’s paper, Vitalis (2007) retells his story of 1950s Saudi Arabia in interlaced infrastructural, emotional, and racial terms eerily similar to those I have explored in this chapter:

Many of the men and women [Kimball] met appeared troubled. “Although . . . the phrase, ‘we’ve never had it so good,’ is used often, nevertheless there are deep currents of disquiet and frustration, and perhaps even more serious personal consequences.” . . . “Even the lowliest” American worker had his or her sense of superiority reinforced through the spatial and racial organization of the camps. “The American position of pre-eminence is reflected in symbol and fact. It is also a position that imposes a high degree of cultural isolation . . . and contributes to an omnipresent sense of precariousness.” When [Kimball] probed, even those who emphasized Aramco’s contribution to Saudi development and the Americans’ “sense of mission were prone to lapses of pessimism.” Many if not most would say, “I’m here for the same reason as everyone else—the money.” (254)

The migrant wives with whom I spent much of my time were sunk in this deep ambivalence, hopeful in one moment that for Equatoguineans, oil would be the salutary imposition of market rationality and benevolent development, yet defensive in the next moment: “Let’s face it, we’re not do-gooders. We’re here to get oil out of the ground. I didn’t come here to do volunteer work. We came to make money.” Frustrated by the complexity of other desires, the spectacular profit to be had by collecting a 75 percent uplift salary, with all expenses paid, in the hardship post of Equatorial Guinea ironically became the least problematic justification for compound life. And, indeed, if one could characterize migrant management work in Equatorial Guinea by a unifying trope, it might be class mobility. One woman confided that she and her husband had $5 million cash in hand to buy an expansive ranch property in Texas; another worked diligently via Skype in her free time, monitoring the building of her dream farmhouse in the French countryside.

I have proposed in this chapter that the enclave is a framing device, a site
of intentional disentanglement. At face value, this separation works toward two purposes. First, the enclaves provide residential comfort for migrant employees, shielding them from the discomforts of unpotable water, sporadic electricity, and typhoid and malaria that suffuse life outside their walls. Second, insofar as the enclaves enclose not only residential life, but also daily office life, they are a spatial representation of the extent to which the oil industry claims to ring-fence corporate practices away from an external business environment widely regarded by the industry as unpredictable, personalistic, and corrupt. Despite the apparently comprehensive partition between each enclave and its outside, the separation is partial, strategic, and performative, with many people doing a tremendous amount of work to maintain its boundaries, and others yearning for more meaningful contact across the apparent divide. Yet the effect of this work of separation is eerily successful: it allows companies—as individual employees living in Equatorial Guinea and as juridically disperse institutions with shareholders and Houston central offices—to inhabit a space of uneven disentanglement. They bemoan what goes on outside their gates as if they have nothing to do with it, when in fact their industry constitutes 98 percent of Equatorial Guinea’s national economy with all the sticky entanglements that entails.

What is perhaps most striking about the compounds, however, is not their apparent partition from life outside the walls, but the ethnic, racial, class, gender, and kin partitions within them. As I have tried to show, these are not separate projects; they are intimately related. As I wrote in the book’s introduction, the mobility of segregated domestic life within the compounds, and the mobility of the technical, legal, and infrastructural forms, like the rig through which oil moves to market, rely on and require one another for their licitness and their performativity. The industry’s careful segregation of gendered and heteronormative married whiteness from “others,” its cordonning-off, and its selective engagements via corporate social responsibility or philanthropy, sanctifies, and indeed domesticates, the power and sovereignty that US oil companies wield in Equatorial Guinea and elsewhere. Conversely, the felicity of the “technological zone” aids and abets the forms of segregation and racialized inequality present in both the compounds and in offshore life. The ability to appeal to standardized accounting practices the world over, or to enclaved corporate practices more generally that ostensibly separate hydrocarbon production from “local life,” offer white supremacy what Cheryl Harris (1993) describes as “the legal legitimation of expectations of power and control that enshrine the status quo as a neutral baseline, while masking the maintenance of white privilege and domination” (1715).
And yet, as my work with the expatriate women in the compounds insistently showed, they live white supremacy ambivalently, redeemed only, and partially, through exorbitant pay. This is the simultaneity, or arguably the causal relationship, of transnational scapes of white supremacy to the isolation and emotional precariousness that Kimball’s work also documented. The horrors of philanthropy—of passing the pencil—and the guilt of showering are moments of rupture. That rupture is partially bandaged by uplift salaries; but, in that moment of rupture, of shame and anguish and isolation for these white women, I’m reminded of Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (Harney and Moten 2013) addressing (on my reading) white people in white/black coalitions: “The problematic of coalition” they write, “is that coalition isn’t something that emerges so that you can come help me, a maneuver that always gets traced back to your own interests. The coalition emerges out of your recognition that it’s fucked up for you, in the same way that we’ve already recognized that it’s fucked up for us. I don’t need your help. I just need you to recognize that this shit is killing you, too, however much more softly, you stupid motherfucker, you know?” (140). (See also Fanon 1991; Césaire 1962; Nandy 1988; Stoler 2010.) The isolation, shame, and guilt produced in and around compound life are fleeting feelings and moments in which these women realized that it is fucked up for them too; in essence, that the ongoing work of white supremacy, colonialism, and resource extraction cannot be undone by philanthropy, but only by the realization and subsequent enactment of the fact that it’s killing us white people, however much more softly, too.

Through ethnographic accounts of offshore rigs and onshore enclaves, chapters 1 and 2 have shown the centrality of racial capitalism (Robinson 1983) to the daily life of oil production. In chapters 3 and 4, the transnational histories and availability of racial differentiation, and imperial debris more broadly, remains a central theme in ethnographic attention to what is perhaps capitalism’s central legal form—the contract.