The first months of 2008 were dark in Malabo. The capital city went for days without electricity, stretching at one point to two weeks. Those who could afford it used private generators in the days sin luz (literally, without light) to keep businesses running, keep homes cool, or allow electric light, music, or television. The city filled with the clattering roar of generator motors fighting their flimsy steel containers, along with the stench of diesel exhaust. My neighbors—a Lebanese-owned restaurant and nightclub complex—had a powerful generator, the noise and fumes from which sometimes filled my small apartment so completely that staying inside became unbearable. Unable to sleep on one such generator-filled night, I opened my door to look for air, and to share water and complaints with Moussa, the Senegalese watchman who spent every night on the sidewalk outside the Lebanese complex. We chatted about the blackout. He said that Senegal provides electricity for many of its neighbors—for Guinea Bissau and as far away as the Ivory Coast. We laughed and said that Senegal should consider providing electricity to Equatorial Guinea as well. But, for all of Senegal’s apparent success in the realm of electricity provision, Moussa spent every night sleeping on card-
board laid over broken concrete on Malabo’s sidewalk, inhaling generator fumes, covered head to toe in clothing and plastic sheeting to fend off the malarial mosquitoes in the eighty-plus-degree heat. Even without electricity, and sleeping on the sidewalk, he seemed to think that Equatorial Guinea provided better prospects than his native Senegal.

In the first decade of the new millennium, Equatorial Guinea was among the world’s fastest-growing economies. It is now the wealthiest country per capita in Africa (ahead of the Seychelles and Mauritius), and in 2013 saw more investment as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) than any other country in the world. It is eminently reasonable to assume, as Moussa did, that even sleeping on the sidewalk where the streets are paved with gold might get you a little closer to it.

On my block in the old colonial center of Malabo, what one might call economic life in a petro-boom was vibrant, if quotidian. In the Lebanese complex on the corner, the large restaurant with a menu priced for foreigners and the wealthy most often seemed empty, but the nightclub was popular with a young local crowd on weekends, and their corner soft-serve machine with strawberry or vanilla for the equivalent of fifty cents did steady business throughout the week. On the opposite corner was a Senegalese-owned restaurant popular with locals for the afternoon meal, outside of which a Beninois cobbler sat on the sidewalk, expertly fixing shoes for next to nothing. Behind him, a small door led into a darkened room, where another young man from Benin sat at a desk adding credit to people’s mobile phones, changing money, and apparently selling some of the jewelry and home décor items displayed around him, although I never witnessed those transactions. Down the block, a local man who owned a small grocery store sold dry and canned goods, sodas and beer, candy, pastries, and basic cleaning supplies. The steps in front of his business served as a gathering place for the neighborhood’s older men, who would stand talking in groups of two and three as afternoon cooled to twilight. Next door, Maria—an Anna-bonés woman—sold bananas, avocados, coca, soursop, tomatoes, and atanga according to the season from a low wooden table set up on the sidewalk in front of her house. A handful of neighborhood children would congregate and play on this corner, sometimes selling for Maria, and other times encouraging passersby to purchase a handful of peanuts from Maria’s table so that they might eat them.

There was a lawyer’s office on the other side of my apartment, and the lawyer therein had a reputation for his willingness to take on clients and cases opposed to the regime. A kind, old, and often drunk Fang man served
as watchman for this office, although the post was clearly a ceremonial one. He and I would often exchange pleasantries in Fang, after which he would switch to Spanish and promise to bring me plantains from his farm outside the city. In the apartment above mine lived a local businessman and his impossibly elegant wife, recently returned to Equatorial Guinea from lives in London and Nigeria. She decorated their spotless apartment with imported IKEA furniture, while he worked to create a local merchants’ association and run a computer store. Down the block in the other direction, there was a shoe store that sold cheap imports from Spain at incredibly high prices, although they were open to bargaining, and across the street was a small hair salon where I would get my hair washed when I had missed the twenty minutes of running water at 6:00 a.m. or was too lazy to dump buckets of cold water over my head.

Around the corner, the Ministry of Finance and Budgets was also routinely without electricity, despite the multiple generators (presumably broken) visible in its courtyards. With the street-facing door to the Ministry’s archives constantly ajar, precariously stacked files and papers escaped into the street, caught by harmattan winds or soaked in the rainy season’s mud. Further down the block sat Martinez Hermanos, a Spanish-owned, Indian-staffed supermarket that started as an import-export business in the colonial 1940s. In both its Bata and Malabo locations, Martinez had that hyper-air-conditioned, too brightly lit supermarket feel that might be found almost anywhere. But the display cases full of cellular phones selling for the equivalent of US$1,000, in contrast with the frozen imported meat that had clearly been under deep freeze for months, perhaps distinguished it as being in Equatorial Guinea. While Martinez’s clientele were mostly wealthy, the city’s majority shopped in smaller stores scattered throughout the city’s neighborhoods and in the open-air markets of Los Ángeles and Semu. Even those who frequented the supermarket for imported packaged goods most often bought fruits, vegetables, meat, and fish at these other markets, where the staples came not from Spain, but Cameroon. Smaller French-owned shops always carried delicious, fresh-baked goods, but nearly everyone subsisted on government-subsidized bread—small, nearly hollow baguettes that sold for five cents each. Lines in front of these bakeries—run by Lebanese merchants who were widely rumored to have a monopoly on the import of oil and flour—were routinely fifteen to twenty people deep. Patrons would buy anywhere from one to thirty loaves at a time, while harried Equatoguinean employees would count out change with lightning speed. Outside of the supermarket and other establishments frequented by the wealthy, male youth
between the ages of about ten and twenty would offer to carry your groceries, wash your car windows, or help with any other task either of you might dream up. Just behind Martinez Hermanos, you could look over a low wall down toward Malabo’s port, into which large wooden boats overflowing with Cameroonian produce would motor on a daily basis to unload their goods.

While prices on staples like tomatoes and plantains fluctuated with border politics—Is the border closed with Cameroon? For how long?—and prices at high-end restaurants and stores were staggeringly high atop petro-inflation, day-to-day currency transactions were relatively stable. As a member of the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC) region, Equatorial Guinea (along with Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, the Republic of Congo, and Gabon) uses the Central African franc (CFA), itself pegged to the Euro and issued by the Bank of Central African States (BEAC) in Cameroon. While this arrangement provided certain stabilities, based on cross-border and postcolonial relationships that tie Equatorial Guinea to wider regional and transnational networks, other aspects of the daily life of money contrast with CFA convertibility. For instance, despite petro-inflation that made some aspects of daily life in Malabo outrageously expensive, in 2010 Equatorial Guinea remained an all-cash economy. It was not uncommon to see nattily dressed men and women walking out of the bank wheeling what any onlooker would know to be suitcases of cash. Credit or ATM cards of any kind were useless within national borders, from the fanciest hotel to the supermarkets. While one had to carry cash at all times, petty crime and theft were rare. It was safe to walk the city’s streets day or night, despite the shared awareness that many people in the city carried large amounts of cash at all times.1

But none of this was why Moussa was in Equatorial Guinea. Moussa was there for the future. On my block and far beyond in the greater Malabo area, stretching unevenly outside the city into Luba, Riaba, and Moka, and into the continental region in Bata, Niefang, Evinayong, and Mongomo, the Equatoguinean landscape was plastered with elaborate signs. These detailed and colorful billboards depicted the large buildings that would soon stand in this or that patch of forest: the new BEAC Regional Bank, the new headquarters of the national gas company, a new refinery, or a new series of mansions and apartment buildings. In front of two matching luxury chalets newly built by the First Lady on the airport road, the sign read: For Rent to Businesses or Individuals. Equatorial Guinea, Growing Day by Day. Chinese construction workers lingered smoking by the unfinished elaborate fence going up around the mansions. Thousands of Chinese workers erected the new skyscrapers of
Malabo II seemingly overnight, and thousands more fanned out through the country paving roads and building dams. Arab Contractors—Egypt’s largest parastatal construction firm—also had workers throughout the country, building a stadium here, a governmental palace or ministry there. Prominent signs for the efforts of major oil companies also dotted the landscape touting community development projects: Building the Future of Equatorial Guinea Today.

In a country the size of Delaware with roughly 700,000 inhabitants, new infrastructure saturated daily life. It is difficult to overstate the pace, the feel, the proliferating sites of physical and infrastructural change in Equatorial Guinea, and in Malabo in particular, during my fieldwork. For Malabo residents, the experience of these projects was visceral, sensory (Larkin 2013; Mrázek 2002; Mba 2011). We watched skyscrapers grow overnight and new roads unspool beneath them; heard the endless thrum of jackhammers, bulldozers, and trucks too big for old colonial roads; smelled the air full of cement dust, felt it on our skin, and tasted it in our mouths. Where in 2006 there was a huge billboard depicting a department store with a glass-front façade, with a Ferrari and its stylish white owner in the foreground (figure 5.1), by 2008 the blue and yellow Lebanese-owned Vantage store appeared, selling home appliances by Whirlpool, Black and Decker, and General Electric.

On the Sipopo road, where massive Ceiba trees climbed through dense equatorial forest and whales migrated not twenty meters offshore, signs sprouted for a new hospital. Sipopo le Golf—a luxury hotel and golf complex—grew there in 2011 to host the African Union Summit. Land was cleared as fast as you could blink, and signs declaring government ownership blossomed in the newly exposed red earth. Expropriation was rampant and all but incontestable, except for those most intimately connected with the regime, and even for them the process was protracted, cumbersome, and most often futile. In an almost farcical move, the president went to great lengths on television to explain how even he had been expropriated by this unstoppable future, as thousands of acres of his private land became “state property,” rented to the large US oil companies for enormous sums of money. Huge tracts of new housing were springing up—small white homes with blue roofs as far as the eye could see. The homes were said to be subsidized by the state and intended for those who had been dispossessed, but were widely known to be for sale by members of government to the highest bidder. The development was called La Buena Esperanza, or Good Hope (Mba 2011; Appel 2018a).

The discovery of commercially viable hydrocarbon deposits brought in
Figure 5.1. Signs of things to come.

Figure 5.2. La Buena Esperanza.
its train not only innumerable infrastructure and construction companies, not only oil production companies large and small from the United States and Western Europe, Brazil, China, South Africa, Russia, and Malaysia, but also countless oil services companies (as chapter 4 describes) offering seismic studies and exploratory drilling; plant construction and rig rental; well heads, casing, and completion services; transport and shipping, submarines, and fireboats; catering and accommodation; and the list goes on. With new companies coming in at a dizzying pace, and all of them wanting to know how to invest, and how to navigate de jure and de facto laws and procedures, state functionaries were well placed to serve as gatekeepers and socios (associates) for transnational business ventures. Equatoguinean government appointees and others who worked with or for the state would moonlight as business and investment consultants. The petro-boom also allowed Equatorial Guinea to all but pay off outstanding debt to international financial institutions, which held nothing of the power or influence they once wielded. While World Bank or International Monetary Fund (IMF) delegations passed through Equatorial Guinea repeatedly during my time there, they were always on “technical support” missions and were rarely able to broker actual loan deals with any meaningful strings attached. Even USAID, attempting to operate a social fund in the country, was under an unprecedented arrangement in which the Equatoguinean government paid for their services, essentially using USAID as a development subcontractor (an agreement that had officially failed as of 2011).

In short, daily economic life in Equatorial Guinea was, on the one hand, quotidian—from blackouts to Moussa’s migration, from sidewalk vendors to overpriced shoes from Spain. On the other hand, daily economic life was extreme—from the felling of swaths of equatorial forest overnight, to the tragicomic act of the president dispossessing himself, to the marginalization of international financial institutions. As anthropologists, we rightly approach these empirics through all their embodied frictions, refusing to flatten them into decontextualized analytics of growth or decline, statistics, demography, or other tools of social engineering. The economy is perhaps chief among the flattening analytics available to capture daily economic life as I’ve described it here (Mitchell 2002; Young 2014, 2017; Appel 2017). Rather than refuse this simplification, however, this chapter starts from the teeming scene in Malabo to trace the making of this unified object called “the national economy” in all its authoritative and fetishized surfaces, and that apparent singularity’s role in the licit life of capitalism.
In Equatorial Guinea as elsewhere, the economy is a privileged object, perhaps the privileged object, in official discourse. State actors and multilateral institutions articulate futures in its terms—development, diversification, growth. In 1983, after his third trip to Equatorial Guinea, United Nations Special Rapporteur and Costa Rican law professor Fernando Volio Jimenez reported that “one official after another all the way up to Obiang himself” justified the limitations on the press (there was no press) and on political participation (political parties were banned) “as being necessary for the focusing of attention on economic issues” (Fegley 1989, 220). Over twenty years later, during my time in Equatorial Guinea, the persistent unreliability of electricity, education, potable water, and healthcare, not to mention the continued draconian limits on press and political organizing of any kind, were similarly justified by the need to focus first on economic development. Here, the economy is both the object of the future and the justification of the present’s constant deferral.

Where the first four chapters of this book refused the timeworn oil-as-money approach, this chapter and the one that follows return to this question. But, having now looked at the offshore, corporate and residential enclaves, contracts and subcontracts, we can return to the question of oil as money with a much more capacious sense of the processes and projects that long precede oil’s specie transubstantiation. In the expanded understanding of oil’s conversion processes that I’ve explored thus far, transnational corporations come under direct ethnographic scrutiny. In contrast, in the oil-as-money literature (both its anthropological and resource curse variations), the industry recedes. As I argued in the introduction, in the oil-as-money literature, the industry itself is all but invisible, merely a revenue-producing machine, a black box with predictable effects (Appel 2012c). And, once the industry has disappeared from view, the well-documented pathologies of oil-exporting places then appear to reside only in state mismanagement of oil money—here, the pathological African state—rather than at many different points within the carbon network, from racialized labor and domes-
tic intimacies to contracts and infrastructures. In resource curse theory in particular, state mismanagement of oil money is made visible in something called the national economy, which can then seem like something “out there,” somehow separate from local experiences of state violence and corporate power. (Recall from the introduction my haunting experience with the HR manager who passed me an article on the resource curse, lamenting state graft but overlooking the agency of his firm entirely.) In this chapter, in my effort to understand the power of the national economy form, I follow the work of resource curse theory in the world via an ethnographic account of Equatorial Guinea’s “first” and “second” National Economic Conferences, held in 1997 and 2007, respectively. The chapter weaves in and out of conference proceedings to examine a constitutive tension in the idea of “national economy,” where national signifies a naively Westphalian framework within which “economies” are still conceived, and economy signifies an imagined space of private accumulation from which the state must recede. I explore each of these terms in turn. First, with regard to economy, I look at resource curse theory, economics “in the wild” (Callon 2007), and the embodied fantasy of an idealized private sector. In the second half of the chapter, I turn to national as a signifier in this pair, focusing ethnographically on the aftermath of the Riggs transnational banking scandal and national budget documents, to think through the relationship between public office and private gain in the wake of oil.

Taking something called a national economy as self-evident—something “out there” that must be made to grow, and on which the future of any and every given place depends—asks that we overlook the translocal histories and political processes of its creation (Mitchell 2002, 246). As has been the case throughout this book, part of my project in this chapter is to narrate those histories and processes as they exist in Equatorial Guinea, showing them to be integral to the making of an object ostensibly a priori to them ontologically. But more pressingly, I want to show how this ability to refer to the national economy as an objective measuring tool or space of intervention, in fact, creates much of the object’s power. By insisting on “the economy’s” power at the same time as we attend to the processes of its making, we begin to see the national economy as part of the project in which Equatoguinean petro-capitalism is made licit.

In its bluntest representation, a given economy is simply a statistical aggregate, and one widely acknowledged as distressingly approximate and incomplete at best. At the same time, the economy is arguably the most privi-
legend epistemological and political object of our unevenly shared modernity. Part of this privilege comes from the seriality of national economies, their comparability from one place to another as if the same. This seriality and comparability efface histories of empire and the radical inequalities produced therein (Speich 2011; Young 2017; Mitchell 2002; Appel 2017). As Equatorial Guinea’s national economy was remade with the arrival of major US oil and gas firms, these histories of domination were the terrain on which its attendant fallacies of liberal equality and the spectacular accumulation of petro-capitalism were built.

Having returned to oil-as-money, we will see in these last two chapters how the mundane bureaucracies of capitalism—accounting, statistics, metrics like GDP, national budget documentation—are constituted by post-colonial, racial, and deeply fraught local politics which form the ground for economic expertise. While I go into an extensive historical and theoretical account of “the economy” elsewhere (Appel 2017), this chapter focuses on how the national economy form can render the radically unequal post-colonial order licit and apparently subject to scientific management. Because the particular science in question is economics, this chapter returns to the spaces of “as if.” As I asked in the introduction, how do oil and gas emerge as if untouched by the messy frictions of cultural production that we see from enclaves to subcontracts? “The” economy—its reliability as a serial transnational form and apparent separability from corporate and state power—is one of the most powerful “as ifs” routinely available to the project of global capitalism.

NATIONAL ECONOMIC CONFERENCE

In 1997, Equatorial Guinea held its first National Economic Conference. There had been national-level conferences before, but the 1997 conference was distinguished by the fact that it was conceived, documented, and publicized by its state organizers as Equatorial Guinea’s first National Economic Conference. Oil had been discovered three years earlier by an independent US oil company, and small amounts of money from exploratory contracts had just begun to circulate back into Equatorial Guinea. This was a dramatic turn of events for a microstate characterized by unprecedented economic collapse in the late 1970s, creeping into a crippling debt burden by the early 1990s. In December 2007, two months into my fieldwork and ten years after the first National Economic Conference, Equatorial Guinea, now flush with
oil wealth, held its second National Economic Conference. Here again, despite conferences on other themes in the interim decade, the “second” designation was an official part of the conference’s full title: National Economic Conference II. National Plan for Economic Development. Agenda for the Diversification of Sources of Growth. Equatorial Guinea toward Horizon 2020. How might we understand the idea, implied in those “first” and “second” descriptors, that a national economy, or at least a conference on it, was something new in the wake of oil? Seemingly ahistorical or amnesiac, the idea that a 1997 conference could be called the “first” regarding something called a “national economy” comes into sharper relief by going back briefly into Equatorial Guinea’s colonial and immediate postcolonial history, some of which I narrated in the book’s Introduction.

Recall, for instance, that as Macías progressively lost control in the first years of his rule, “after 1970 there was not one reliable economic figure, government statistic or census report to be found in the country” (Fegley 1989, 72). After eight years of la triste memoria under Macías, in which being identified as an intellectual was reason enough to be put to death, and statistics were officially illegal, Obiang’s coup brought foreign observers back into the country for the first time. Dr. Alejandro Artucio, an Uruguayan lawyer invited to Equatorial Guinea to witness Macías’s trial by the new regime, offered a firsthand account of the economic situation he found in 1979:

It can fairly be said that the economic, social and cultural situation I found in Malabo was bordering on a national disaster. A few data will suffice to explain. The economy was to all intents and purposes paralyzed. The basic services—electric power, transport, the post, banking, communications, etc.—were virtually at a standstill. It was the practice for all citizens, including salaried government officials, to go into the forest in search of fruit and other food for themselves and their families. Macías, as Head of State, took the national treasure to his palace of Nzeng Ayong, [and] . . . he administered the funds of the state from his house. He had not ventured into the capital for five years. . . . Commerce is practically at a standstill in Malabo. There are only a few small shops . . . still open but their shelves are empty. There is not a single restaurant in the whole town. There has been no electric power since 1978. For four years or so, there has been no written press in the country because, according to the government, there has been no paper. (Artucio 1979, 14–15)

As Fegley summarizes, “Nowhere at any time had an economy collapsed in the sense that Equatorial Guinea’s had by 1978” (1989, 155). A separate sphere
called a national economy—recognizable and circulatable beyond national boundaries—is predicated first on the act of money changing hands, and second, on certain forms of representation of those acts in the aggregate: record keeping, accounting, statistic and demographic data—and paper.

Although foreign aid poured into Equatorial Guinea with the advent of Obiang’s rule, and the country joined the CEMAC region in 1988, those renewed ties had little effect on an already-fraught relationship to certain forms of knowledge production dating back to the colonial era. Even in 2009, the IMF wrote of the country that “data on the national accounts, balance of payments, and inflation all have significant limitations and make it difficult to get an accurate representation of the performance of the non-oil sector and domestic price developments” (16). In addition to noting lacunae in the specific forms of knowledge production required to make a national economy in the normative sense, this report also draws our attention to an interesting detail: the IMF had the hardest time finding data for the non-oil sector. Although they don’t specify why, one can infer that oil industry accounting makes up for the data gap, and that Equatorial Guinea’s public administration is obliged to keep certain kinds of records in the oil and gas sector that are not obligatory outside those boundaries.

From erratic colonial administration, to the Franco regime’s complicity in official silences, to the national treasure in Macías’s Nzeng Ayong home, to the Ministry of Finance and Budget’s records soaked in the street, Equatorial Guinea has had a long, fraught relationship with the kinds of enumeration and recording practices constitutive of the national economy form. And yet, with oil, that form was interpellated in new ways. Contracts with major multinational firms, required the making of a series of documents—budgets, reports, economic forecasts—and procedures for accounting, accountability, and audit, among others. An acceptably documented national economy became both newly demanded and newly possible, hailed by the visibility of a single, and singularly profitable, global commodity. The economy, in other words, did not predate the commodity in any simple way, as a separate sphere ready to be populated. Rather, the commodity’s circulation made the economy both possible and necessary in new ways.2
UTOPIA AND DYSTOPIA I:  
THE RESOURCE CURSE AND SALT INTO GOLD

The future remains a stranger to most anthropological models of culture . . . . Economics has become the science of the future, and when human beings are seen as having a future, the keywords such as wants, needs, expectations, calculations, have become hardwired into the discourse of economics. In a word, the cultural actor is a person of and from the past, and the economic actor a person of the future.

—Arjun Appadurai, The Future as Cultural Fact

In the year 2020, Equatoguinean society will be dominated by the middle class, with work and regular income available to all citizens, who will own their homes, whose children will be educated, and who will be capable of meeting their health needs.

—República de Guinea Ecuatorial, “Plan Nacional de Desarrollo Económico y Social”

The 2007 Horizon 2020 Conference was held in Bata, Equatorial Guinea’s second city. Unlike claustrophobic Malabo, where you could barely tell that the ocean was just over there unless you peered over a wall, Bata felt expansive, with wide roads, fewer people, and room to breathe. Although daily activities of governance took place in Malabo, the public administration moved, working periodically from a second set of ministerial and administrative buildings and palaces in Bata. Thus, for those living in Malabo, if one needed an official to sign a document or issue a permit, it was not uncommon to hear that “the government is in Bata,” suggesting that unless you wanted to fly or take an irregular boat to the continent, that need wouldn’t be filled any time soon. During preparations for the National Economic Conference, radio announcers and empty streets reminded Malabeños daily that the government was, indeed, in Bata.

At the conference, the president and the prime ministers, ministers of government, oil company representatives and their local liaisons, national and international business owners hoping to invest, the World Bank, the IMF, USAID, Washington lobbyists, United Nations Development Programme personnel, European Community and Spanish Cooperation delegates, diplomats from throughout the region, local business men and women, and who knows who else were all brought together in the name of the future: Horizon
2020. After an initial day of registration, opening ceremonies, and closed-door meetings, Day 2 included four concurrent, day-long presentation sessions by conference participants on infrastructure, social sector, public sector, and private sector. I followed the decidedly largest portion of the crowd into the private sector session, held in an opulent conference hall with seating for perhaps five hundred people. The hall’s front wall was painted floor to ceiling with a romantic mural of our host city. Leafy cacao and ceiba trees framed the foreground, inviting the eye in toward an idyllic rendering of the newly constructed port just behind. The harbor glinted clean at the edge of shimmering blue water, plied equally by oil tankers and cayucos—dugout canoes in common use throughout the country’s coastal regions for fishing, transport, and recreation. With Bioko Island and Malabo visible in the background, the entire painting glowed a warm pink-orange, lit by the flaring oil platforms painted pastorally at the mural’s bottom left. With the mural as a backdrop, men in suits began to fill a series of chairs at a long table behind large white computer monitors. Oversized plastic flowers and plants lined the floor in front of the table. This artificial hedge was interrupted only in front of the speaker’s podium, inexplicably embellished with a three-foot-tall plastic martini glass placed on the floor in front of it, with two shorter versions on either side. As we took our seats, there looked to be about two hundred or so people in the room, about 80 percent of whom seemed to be Equatoguinean, mostly men, talking with one another in Spanish or Fang. The first two rows of the auditorium were filled with white men, and young Equatoguinean women in conference uniforms scurried around the front of the auditorium distributing water bottles and seeing to the needs of the dignitaries in the audience.4

The printed materials we were given as conference attendees were startling. As we entered, we were each handed a navy blue plastic carrying case, modeled after a briefcase, containing more aggregated information about Equatorial Guinea than had arguably ever been released into the public. Each plastic briefcase included three main booklets of about seventy-five pages each. Printed in vibrant color with extensive graphs and charts, the first booklet offered an economic and social diagnosis of the country; the second, strategies for improving that diagnosis over the next thirteen years; and the third, a poverty profile. Each briefcase also contained five smaller booklets of demographic and statistical analyses, including one documenting the results of the country’s third general census in 2002. Within the context of Equatorial Guinea’s long and fraught history around these forms of knowledge production, and the judge’s quip—“it is easier to find petroleum
than information”—audience members marveled quietly at the material. Where did it come from? Who wrote it? Who produced the statistics? Is there any reason to think that any of it is accurate? The materials quickly became a hot commodity after the conference and were essentially impossible to get a hold of had one not been among the lucky few in attendance. Even at the conference itself, they ran out early.

What is it about oil, if anything, that produces such unprecedented displays? Certainly, there is a performance for the international community; and as Callon (1998) would have it, and Butler (1993) and Mol (2002) too, there is performance going on here. But what exactly is “in formation” or “being formed”? As I will suggest below, weaving through the themes of the resource curse, an idealized private sector, and the pairing of utopic futures with dystopic presents, there is something about this new, separated space of the national economy that seems “safe” for the ruling regime, for transnational corporations, and for civil society participants. When something called the “national economy” is laid out in colorful graphs and charts as an entity out there in the future to be diversified, it allows a space to open up between the world and its representation, between the people in that room and the reform agendas set out in those unprecedented booklets. “The idea of ‘the economy’ provided a mode of seeing and a way of organizing the world that could diagnose a country’s fundamental condition, frame the terms of its public debate, picture its collective growth or decline, and propose remedies for improvement, all in terms of what seemed a legible series of measurements, goals, and comparisons” (Mitchell 2002, 272). Rather than the anthropological task being to collapse that distance, I want to acknowledge its power by exploring the conditions of its making and effects. How is the distance between absolute state/corporate power and complicity, on the one hand, and these colorful graphs and charts, on the other, made, and what does it, in turn, make in the world?

An interlocutor who had been involved in conference preparations, including the drafting of these documents, explained that the Ministry of Planning, officially in charge of the event, had subcontracted the research and publication work to a Senegalese consulting company specializing in economic development. As a result of this subcontract, early meetings, research, and drafting work were conducted in French. Although French is spoken widely in Equatorial Guinea, given both the country’s position in a francophone region and the number of people who lived in exile in Gabon, many Equatoguineans don’t speak French. My interlocutor recounted that those early meetings were far from participatory and full of grumbling by
Spanish speakers about their inability to participate meaningfully. Meanwhile, the leadership in the Ministry of Planning was desperately underprepared to assume their share of conference preparation. They didn’t have office space to hold meetings or accommodate workers; they didn’t have paper, photocopy machines, or ink. Hence, much of their contribution to the conference literature was eventually forged in the offices of an US development subcontractor, in town for other purposes. The documents were then printed and duplicated in Spain before making their way back just in time for the conference. The transnational, subcontracted, and linguistically and processually messy process of making of these documents redoubles the theme of separation at issue here. From Senegalese and American development experts came a series of unprecedented documents filled with predictions about the resource curse and statistics of unknown origin. Processes of economic theory-making and the production and circulation of oft-repressed forms of information turned these documents into what my informant called “dream papers,” a widely shared sentiment at the conference and after that the materials’ contents were more daydreams spun atop economic theory than routes through petro-capitalist complicity between foreign companies and the Equatoguinean state.

The dream papers came to life through the long hours of the private sector session, as the Minister of Mines, representatives from the state oil and gas companies, and a German agro-businessman seemingly in the process of brokering a large deal with the government, one after another, narrated a future at once utopic and surreal:

In the energy sector, the government will build two conditioning plants, one in Bata and one in Malabo, to make gas available for local use and diminish ongoing reliance on foreign processing of their products. They will also construct a modular refinery in the country to bring down prices. By 2020, state-of-the-art gas processing facilities in Equatorial Guinea will monetize the gas that is currently burned off in the petroleum production process not only here, but also in Cameroon and Nigeria.

The potential for the fishing industry is colossal for industrial, artisanal, and farmed fish in the ocean and rivers, with an estimated local capacity of 65,000 tons per year, the equivalent of $100,000,000 US. The government will build two industrial centers and ice factories in Malabo and Bata to service this industry. They will educate oceanographers and boat engineers. By 2020 there will be a fleet of industrial fishing ships, and an industry producing value-added products for export including salted, dried, and smoked fish,
canned and packaged products, and modern fish farms. By 2020 Equatorial Guinea will be the commercial center in the region for sea products. Anno-bón will be the center of the industry, where women will be transformed into commercial fishers.

Equatorial Guinea has the richest soil in the world for tropical cultivants. By 2020 local agriculture will supply one hundred percent of local nutrition needs and there will be more for export. The forests of 2020 will be conserved. There will be a restriction on timber exports, shifting to add-value products to preserve the ecosystem. Tourism too is an important world industry that generates employment and eradicates poverty. Equatorial Guinea will be a destination for luxury and business tourism, offering endemic-species safaris in the Bioko Caldera, sumptuous lodges on remote islands, and innumerable opportunities to invest while you recreate.

Small businesses and the entrepreneurial sector are the priority in this process. The private sector must drive the economy. It should be the right of small and medium size businesses to avoid being in an uncompetitive economy. This will require microfinance, small business loans, export infrastructure, easy and transparent access to credit for small businesses.

But the “pure gold,” the German businessman suggested as the session concluded, is in salt. “Equatorial Guinea has excellent conditions to produce salt. The production of salt here, alongside caustic soda and chlorine, is the first step in modern industrialization, and then into the real chemical industry: plastic and other petroleum products that turn salt into pure gold.”

As he hurried to get through his last improbable sentences, having been told repeatedly and loudly to end his presentation, the Minister of Mines finally stood to conclude the session: “By 2020, Equatorial Guinea will be a successful African model of the transition from a petroleum economy to a diversified economy. Equatorial Guinea will be the first country in the global South to have avoided the resource curse.”

The salt-into-gold future presented to the audience of this conference was premised to a surprising degree on resource curse theory. Even more specifically, the erratic utopias of economic diversification were premised on an anticipation of “Dutch Disease” (Ebrahim-Zadeh 2003; Sachs and Warner 2001), an economic theory that takes its name from the Netherlands, where, after oil and gas discoveries in the North Sea in the 1970s, revenue from the non-oil manufacturing sector started to plummet. The “disease” now refers to the pattern in resource-rich countries of exchange rate appreciation; a
decrease in domestic manufacturing, agriculture, and nonresource exports; and an increased reliance on imports. Economic diversification away from oil is widely prescribed as the “treatment” for this malady, thus the 2007 conference title—“National Plan for Economic Development and Agenda for the Diversification of Sources of Growth.”

That the Dutch Disease was presented as a looming fate for Equatorial Guinea by both conference presenters and the printed materials was incongruous in multiple ways. In the first instance, the country had long been without a productive agricultural sector, let alone other industries for either domestic consumption or export. Far from a disease contracted in relation to oil, the rise and fall of a cocoa industry had everything to do with colonial and postcolonial relationships (not only between Spain and Equatorial Guinea, but also with Nigerian and Liberian labor and Fernandino landowners), contemporary political struggles over imports from Cameroon, and internal private property issues. Moreover, with once oil-rich Gabon just across Equatorial Guinea’s eastern border, and with the offshore platforms of Nigeria visible on clear nights from the shores of Malabo, Equatoguineans did not need a World Bank or International Monetary Fund expert to help them understand the perils of becoming an oil exporter, or to realize that these perils had everything to do with the toxic cocktail of local politics and our world’s most powerful corporations. And yet, a narrative that could lay these outcomes at the foot of a resource, and not at the feet of power, was welcome by many in attendance at the conference. The resource curse provided a safe, causal, and authoritative narrative that replaced translocal histories of power and ownership, offering a modular explanation for social and economic ills that moved responsibility, in both time and space, away from grounded histories and toward futures already seen elsewhere, ostensibly inherent in qualities of the resource. The conference became about avoiding a potentiality “out there” as opposed to reorganizing power distributions “in here.” The national economy becomes another offshore, another enclave, another stage for the performance of liberalism—market rationality and diversification—erected on the terrain of postcolonial inequality and capitalist violence.

The work that resource curse theory in particular was doing at this conference was astounding, specifically in relation to time: a future in which the resource curse “might” befall us; a deferred future in which we can be everything that we are not now; a future framed by economic theory in which we don’t have to think about the historically and politically laden past or present. And yet, each of the conference’s utopic visions was burdened by layers
of dystopic presents and pasts. These visions required tremendous public acts of forgetting and future-oriented confabulations—fabricating experiences as compensation for loss of memory. *Through what fictions and forgetting must the making of a serial thing called a “national economy” proceed?*

The projected fishing industry would require a program of environmental controls for off-platform pollution, and yet as Eugenio intimated, and as others explained to me on multiple occasions, there had not been a single independent environmental review of Equatorial Guinea’s offshore oil industry. Equatoguinean officials tasked with environmental assessment and regulation had no relevant training and often took their days on-platform as a vacation. In one story recounted to me, the visiting “assessor” left his room on the rig only for meals. Industry environmental reviews seemed little better. They were consistently done in-house between subcontractors, and the results were always positive, despite documented evidence on one major platform of the intentional manipulation of water quality testing. On the education of oceanographers and engineers, the country has one university—the National University of Equatorial Guinea—which, during my fieldwork, had sporadic electricity, a library of perhaps fifty books, and six computers belonging to an American study abroad program doing primate research (a group of white people known locally, in a delightful inversion of racist colonial stereotypes, as “los monkeys”). While President Obiang’s regime is arguably more open to intellectual endeavor than that of Macías, the country was without a single bookstore during my fieldwork.⁶

A slightly deeper history of the fishing industry and Annobón’s prospective role therein takes us back to 1975, the year in which Macías officially outlawed doctors and medical care and half of the island’s inhabitants died, as recounted in the introduction. During my fieldwork, one could get to Annobón only by boat—a state-owned ferry service that was notoriously unreliable and often diverted to Bata. A new airport was under construction on Annobón, however, and although quoted airfares would be prohibitively expensive for the majority of those commuting to and from Annobón for their livelihoods, the airport was central to the imagined tourism industry, allowing access to Annobón’s exquisitely beautiful, sparsely populated beaches. Annobón’s future as a tourist utopia of untouched beaches, depopulated by leprosy and various forms of political violence, is overlaid not only with the island’s history, but also with contemporary forms of surveillance and repression throughout Equatorial Guinea. During my fieldwork, maps were illegal, as was photography in cities or anywhere in the country in view of a policeman or soldier. Roads were interrupted by official and unofficial check-
points guarded by armed soldiers. While simple payments of beer or a few dollars were all that was required at most stops, circulation in the country was difficult for foreigners and locals alike. Websites and tourist brochures advertised the beautiful views to be had from atop El Pico, the mountain that rises along Malabo’s southwestern edge, yet the road up the mountain was guarded by soldiers, and during my fourteen months in Equatorial Guinea, I was never able to secure permission to go up.

The utopian agricultural future totters uncomfortably on dystopia as well. Recall from the introduction and chapter 4 that labor in Equatorial Guinea’s colonial cocoa industry was provided largely by Liberians and then Nigerians—the latter of which left en masse when Macías stopped paying them (Daly 2013, 2017; Martino 2017). This led to Macías decreeing a compulsory labor act for Equatoguinean citizens in 1972, requiring unpaid labor from all men, sparking another mass exodus, this time of Equatoguineans. Since the precipitous decline of cocoa production that followed, Equatorial Guinea has had no industrialized agriculture. While much of the population outside the major cities is involved in subsistence farming, with some selling small surpluses to local markets, bulk agricultural products are imported from Cameroon. Less than a month after the conference’s proclamations on the future of agriculture, the Minister of Agriculture and Forestry (the president’s much-maligned son, Teodorín) was shown on television throwing money and basic tools to elated farmers, arms outstretched. The 2007 antilogging law—requiring all felled timber to be used in-country—did not seem to disrupt Teodorín’s large personal timber concession with Malaysia, later used by an American diplomat to explain how Teodorín came to have the money to fund his personal collection of mansions and luxury cars, despite his small ministerial salary (Smith 2009). To imagine that the resource curse might account for how to strengthen or diversify economic activity in the wake of these histories would be laughable, if it weren’t so productive.

The surreal utopias presented at the conference were not the product of resource curse theory alone. The detached, idealized, private sector fantasies were also rooted in local experiences of a suffocating authoritarian regime and translocal imaginings of the endless riches to be had on the Equatoguinean frontier (Tsing 2005). Despite, or perhaps because of, the mirrored surrealities of a fishing sector with unimpeded offshore pollution; a tourism industry without maps or cameras; forest conservation or a flourishing agricultural sector with a minister who personally maintains the country’s most lucrative illegal timber concession, I repeatedly found myself in the unexpected position of cheering for this imaginary object of desire called a
“private sector,” out of whose way the state claimed to want to get. As presenters narrated future utopias of microfinance, small business loans, export infrastructure, and access to credit for small businesses, even my graduate training to sniff out neoliberalism in all its forms could not overpower my visceral support of something, anything, other than a totalitarian state apparatus, strengthened beyond measure by the complicity of US oil companies. At the conference and elsewhere, I was not alone.

UTOPIA AND DYSTOPIA II: “PRIVATE” SECTOR AND “PUBLIC” ADMINISTRATION

One of the first audience members to ask a question after the surreal narration of future utopias was the head of the Equatoguinean delegation for small and medium-sized businesses. Obliquely referencing the amnesias of the current conference, he reminded the audience of a 1982 national forum on the promotion of business, and of the 1997 conference, where it was also established that the private sector would be the motor of development. After these reminders, he asked, “Where are we now? We need financing and access to credit, education, good labor conditions, access to technology, and a fiscal climate according to the law. I’m no xenophobe, but foreign companies are granted all the big contracts, and then we’re hired at dismal wages as subcontractors. I have the capacity but I lack the capital. If I had the money, I too could subcontract an architect or an engineer.” When he finished, much of the conference room erupted in boisterous applause and full-throated cheers, and he turned, smiled, and waved at the crowd. His question was a thinly veiled critique of the state and the repetitive conferences that came to the same conclusions, yet produced nothing—no credit, no education, no fiscal climate according to law, no disengagement of the state from its control of the private sector. Despite these serial failures, the boisterous response to his question revealed that the conference and its imagined private sector did offer the opportunity, otherwise unavailable, for people to gather in large numbers and cheer loudly at indirect critiques of the regime.

The desire for an idealized private sector was a visceral experience that caught me off guard more than once during my fieldwork. Indeed, during my time in Equatorial Guinea, this imagined private sector was the widely preferred realm of fantasies of freedom and opportunity for many. While these fantasies were certainly not evenly shared, neither were they the exclusive daydreams of the wealthy or well-connected. These desires stretched from those of impoverished young musicians who had to go to Gabon to find
a recording studio free from government or Spanish sponsorship/censorship, to those of young Americans working in an “MBAS without Borders” program who were shocked at the extent to which, as they put it, “big brother is watching everything in Equatorial Guinea.” A private sector detached from this pervasive feeling of surveillance and control felt downright radical. In the pages that follow, I explore different moments of this desire for and idealization of a future private sector, thinking through its ambivalent character of subversion on the one hand and intimate subvention of state power on the other.

On weekends through June and July in 2008, Orange—the central brand of France Telecom, at that point trying to make inroads into the cell phone market in Equatorial Guinea—sponsored a free music and dance festival, setting up a stage and sound system in the public plaza around Malabo’s city hall. Replete with obnoxious recorded advertisements about Orange goods and services blaring between youthful acts, the festival allowed for something that rarely happened in Equatorial Guinea: free public art and an open-air public gathering, seemingly unrelated to the regime or the Spanish or French cultural centers, at least at first glance. I attended the festival nearly every weekend, surrounded mostly by groups of teenagers with younger siblings in tow; but a variety of others lingered around the crowd’s edges, curious about this unusual public spectacle. The programming was heavily focused on hip hop culture and included numerous rap and break dancing groups. Where alabaciones (praise songs) flooded the official music industry, whose only source of income was the state, throughout the Orange summer stage, there was not a single song praising Obiang or the regime. Indeed, there were several songs that critiqued him, directly or indirectly. There was even a song about marijuana.

With labor and event management subcontracted to a small Equatoguinean media company owned by a young Equatoguinean recently returned from France, the audience was clearly seduced by what Orange and its local collaborators were able to facilitate. In a place where the outlets for dissent of any kind were curtailed to hushed conversations around dinner tables, or framed by “international community” spaces like the Spanish Cultural Center, the spaces that private enterprise seemed to open up—like this Orange stage—felt oddly radical and out of control. As with the head delegate for small and medium-sized businesses, who felt free to critique the state at a conference on the economy, on the Orange stage, too, capitalism in its own image became a felt space of possibility and unpredictability for the Equatoguinean youth performing, for those of us in the audience, and clearly
for the mayor herself, whom I watched leave in a huff during the marijuana song. Rather than dismiss everything that happened on the Orange stage that summer—or indeed fantasies of the private sector, in general—as essentially and exclusively problematic, I follow Miyazaki (2013) and others in suggesting that to take the economy seriously is, in part, to take seriously people’s fantasies about it.

The seduction of the private sector was a common trope with which to narrate what was possible, and by extension what was not possible, in Equatorial Guinea. A US development worker who had spent his entire professional life working for NGOs in Africa, and was now in Equatorial Guinea doing corporate social responsibility work for an oil company, said of his new position, “Things happen a lot quicker in the private sector.” He continued:

In the NGO world, the pace of change [was slow]. The private sector doesn’t think that way. It’s “We’ve got the money, let’s do it.” . . . What I see here is very unlike any African country I’ve been in. This is virgin territory; there haven’t been NGOs. Future opportunities are linked to the private sector more than other places I’ve been. They need NGOs and they need more work in the development side of things, but what they have is that the private sector has parachuted in. There are few places in the world where investors or businesses looking to expand can come and it’s a clean slate. If you come with the right idea and the right partners, you can pretty much do what you want to do here. Everyone wants to talk business.

Feliciano, a recently returned Equatoguinean man, was working for a software company with a contract to “modernize” the social security system by digitizing records. He noted with some pride that this work strained against ethnic and other local divisions, implying that those divisions were exacerbated by the hand-written, inconsistent record-keeping practices that his company sought to put in the past. He said his project would bring real change “if we don’t get kicked out first.” I smiled and said that I too was hoping not to get kicked out, to which he replied, “Oh, but we’re not an NGO. We’re a business in it to make money.” The difference, he explained, was in the politics. NGOs represent political interests and are thus more likely to be expelled from the country. Profit, on the other hand, is apolitical. While Feliciano knew that I was a researcher affiliated with a foreign university, unattached to any NGO, my lack of a profit motive placed me on the “political” side of a line. It was only profit that offered safe haven in a place where getting expelled was a distinct possibility.

From the Orange summer concert series, to the newly privatized devel-
opment worker’s sense of “virgin territory,” to Feliciano’s conviction that the profit motive sheltered his company’s presence and potential to foment social change, the inhabited feeling that the private sector was variously unencumbered and full of potential was pervasive. And yet, it is precisely because private profit is almost entirely of a piece with public power in Equatorial Guinea that it seems to operate so freely. In other words, capitalist expansion and frontier-making—while it undeniably opened up contingent and newly unstable spaces of expression, dissent, or the opportunity for private gain—was fundamentally a state-sanctioned and state-building project. (We might think again about the power of the production sharing contract here, the signing of which not only directly supports Obiang’s regime, but also then proliferates a world of subcontracting arrangements.) As the development worker put it, “if you come with the right partners,” you can pretty much do what you want to do, gesturing to the need to collaborate with a local socio in all business ventures. Orange undoubtedly lined the pockets of local power holders to bring goods and services into the country. And Feliciano too went on to explain that, in order not to get expelled, his company had cultivated local power holders to ensure their work. Decree 137, which mandated that all businesses be 35 percent locally owned, made “socio” a common role for Equatoguinean state personnel or high-powered individuals, put on retainer to serve as government liaisons. Each company paid a high-level functionary to protect their interests, push their ideas and needs ahead, and get their paperwork through. While Feliciano was excited that his company pushed against localisms of various kinds, it also used those very localisms (referred to as enchufes, or plugs into the system) to ensure success. Thus, this idealized, virgin, private sector Eden—one that shimmered in the mural of Bata, beckoned in the boundless future utopias of fishing and tourism, and lured those of us living in Malabo’s boom times out into summer evenings for corporate-sponsored concerts—was deeply entangled with Equatorial Guinea’s state apparatus, itself made by histories and presents of licit wealth creation at the intersection of public office and private gain.

**DYSTOPIA AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION**

In this final section of the chapter, I take up public sector finance (Elyachar 2012; see also Collier in Ong and Collier 2005) as a constitutive piece of the national economy form. Misunderstanding “the economy” as coterminous with the private sector has been one of the less-remarked effects of neoliberalism when, in fact, across Organization for Economic Cooperation and
Development (OECD) countries we see that total government output accounts for nearly half of GDP (Stiglitz et al. 2011). In Equatorial Guinea, both the private sector and the economy as a whole are exceptionally coterminous with “public sector finance,” to such an extent that it would be difficult to draw the boundary in practice. Oil production blurs those lines further and, because of that intensified blurring, hails state and corporate actors to draw those boundaries in new ways (Mitchell 1991). In order to think about Equatoguinean public sector finance in the age of oil, and to think creatively about the national economy as an ethnographic object and the way it articulates illicit state and corporate power, development dreams, and spectacular accumulation, we must first think about “corruption,” as I started to do in chapter 3 on production sharing contracts. Here, I am interested in the intersection of Equatoguinean norms around state officials and accumulation (themselves contested and multiple), and the equally heterogeneous norms of liberal, rule-of-law bureaucracy that come with oil companies and intensified attention from the World Bank, IMF, and groups like Transparency International.

Remember, again, that Equatorial Guinea is widely ranked among the most corrupt and kleptocratic dictatorships in the world by Transparency International, the World Bank, Freedom House, the Economist Intelligence Unit, and other global “anticorruption” organizations. After being deemed “too opaque to rank” by Transparency International in 2016, Equatorial Guinea was number 171 of 180 countries on their influential Corruption Perceptions Index in 2017. In 2016, Freedom House put the country in its “worst of the worst” category, along with North Korea, Sudan, and Turkmenistan, earning an eight out of one hundred on their scale of “not free” (0) to “free” (100). Obiang himself consistently places among the richest leaders in the world. Scholarly accounts of Equatorial Guinea also often frame the country as exceptional. Even Bayart (2009), who argues that “we should not draw too hasty conclusions about the privileged relationship between power and wealth [given that] the positions of power never absorb all the channels of wealth,” goes on to say that “only the political gangsterism of a Touré family in Guinea, or an Nguema family in Equatorial Guinea, approaches a de facto confiscation of the means of wealth” (91). And yet, the now approaching four-decade rule of Obiang Nguema Mbasogo is, like all state projects, a “multilayered, contradictory, translocal ensemble of institutions, practices and people” (Sharma and Gupta 2006, 6). Not least, as this book has chronicled, it owes its longevity to US oil companies, plain and simple. While Obi-
Obiang’s family is from Mongomo, a town in the continental province of Wele Nzas. He is ethnically Fang, as are the majority of Equatoguineans. Widely circulating ethnic stereotypes in Equatorial Guinea (emerging from colonial and postcolonial politics) portray Fang people as aggressive, power hungry, and fiercely loyal to family. But the “Nguema family,” or the “Fang people,” or “people from Mongomo,” or even “Obiang’s regime” are hardly the monoliths they are so often made out to be. It is widely known among Equatoguineans, for instance, that Obiang has jailed members of his own family for treachery or potential treachery; that some of his fiercest political opposition comes from Mongomo; and that Fang people are not only the demographic majority of power holders, but also the demographic majority of the poor and dispossessed in the country. Still, Bubi, Combe, and Annabonés people, let alone immigrants, are routinely the victims of ethnically based structural violence. With narrower kinship networks and fewer direct links to power, it is often harder for Bubi or Annabonés people to get jobs or to make other claims on the state often mobilized through kin-based networks. Thus, while I want to destabilize the homogenizing stories of Obiang and his family, I also want to underline the significance of kinship in politics more broadly. In such a small place, as one friend put it to me, “la politica toca la fibra familiar”: Politics touches (but more accurately, is made in) the fabric of families. Equatoguineans interested in oppositional politics or contemplating a public critique of the regime are generally disciplined with familial responsibility, even if family members agree with the critique. “Your aunt works at the port” or “your cousin is minister of such and such,” which is to say, keep critiques to yourself so as not to jeopardize shared income streams or create family conflict.

Understanding how power and wealth creation are made licit in a given place takes aim at assumptions about legal liberalism—a separation of “public” and “private” spheres, and then naming their commingling as corruption—as unproblematic, or the only frame within which licit wealth might be created. As I wrote earlier, Mbembe (2001) and others (Berry 1993; Guyer 2004) criticize this approach for undermining “the very possibility of understanding African economic and political facts” (Mbembe 2001, 7), let alone the
realities of US politics, and instead producing a situation in which we know everything about what African states seem to lack, but nothing about what they actually are and how they work. While I agree with Mbembe and others, it has been a guiding intervention of this book that the danger in leaving the analysis there is the potential to overlook the effects in the world of all that lack talk. Misunderstandings of African economic and political facts—the absurd indices that rank freedom on 0–100 scales—are not simply wrong. They are incredibly productive processes in the world, not only because people in powerful positions hold them and act on them, but also because they become institutionalized in “neutral,” “technical” and “liberal” instruments, such as national economies and contracts. It is one thing to understand the intimate relationship of the idealized private sector to political power on its own terms, and indeed I start here with a few “local” stories to animate certain contested Equatoguinean norms around accumulation. It is quite another thing, however, to show the new terrain on which conflicts over public wealth take shape post-oil.

**PUBLIC POWER AND PRIVATE ACCUMULATION BEFORE AND AFTER OIL**

Outside Equatorial Guinea’s two main cities, the small villages and towns of Bioko and Río Muni are dotted with large, cement homes that often stand out amid smaller homes made from more provisional materials. Asking about those homes would inevitably lead to a story of someone from the community who now worked in the administration and had built a house in his or her natal town postappointment. While there were always exceptions, it was incumbent upon those with higher positions in the administration, or who otherwise got rich, to construct a prestigious cement house—the bigger and more ostentatious the better—in the town of their birth. I would also hear, scathingly, that “so and so is now vice minister of such and such and he hasn’t built anything here yet.” In other words, if you didn’t build one of these structures, you could be seen as selfish, as a failure, and as ungenerous. These buildings were not “philanthropic” structures in the liberal way I had come to understand philanthropy; they were neither schools nor orphanages, clinics nor libraries. Rather, they were private residences whose interiors would be enjoyed only by the immediate and extended network of the powerful persons who owned them. For the wider population, however, these buildings were philanthropic: material signs of ethical action, monuments to the correct moral relationship between powerful people and the
rest. They showed investment in and attention to the owners’ local communities, despite their wealth having been gained in the capital city.

I use a story of Luis, an Equatoguinean man in his late thirties who had lost his job at an airline office, to sketch another form of ethical obligation at stake in questions of public power and private accumulation. Beside himself and with no job prospects, Luis contacted our mutual friend Josefina—a well-connected woman from a powerful family—for help, advice, and perhaps an enchufe for a job. I was there when Josefina took Luis’s call, and after the animated phone conversation to which I was half-privy, Josefina was irate, recounting the ethics of the situation in sharply ethnic terms: “Luis’s father is rich and powerful! He has a fleet of cars and houses everywhere! But he has given his son nothing! This is how the Bubis are! It is horrible! If his father was Fang, even if the son had no education, he would be given a job!” Josefina, from a Fang family, saw Luis’s plight as complete kinship negligence on the part of the father, explicable only in terms of his ethnicity. In other words, for Josefina, the only acceptable thing for a father of means to do in this situation would be to use his wealth and influence to get his son a job. In Equatorial Guinea, arguably among certain ethnic groups in particular, this behavior is expected, even morally demanded, and its absence may be seen as a grave moral transgression.

At the same time, nearly every Equatoguinean who I came to know, regardless of their ethnicity or relationship to the regime, was disgusted by what they perceived to be the excesses of influence and private accumulation committed by the most powerful at the blatant expense of public goods and services. In other words, all forms of power and privilege have limits and thresholds. Equatoguineans could demand without hypocrisy that influential fathers must find positions for their children, often in government; that important public figures must build prestigious private homes in their natal towns; and that those in power must stop the excessive abuse of their positions for private gain. State and nonstate actors constantly, uneasily negotiated these tensions (Sharma and Gupta 2006; Smith 2007).

While these stories of prestigious houses in rural towns and kin-based hiring practices give texture to the daily life of “public power and private gain,” the stakes of these negotiations and the scales at which they ramify changed radically with the coming of oil. Recall the Riggs Bank scandal I discussed in chapter 3, in which a US Senate subcommittee concluded that everyone from the Riggs Bank employee directly responsible for the Equatoguinean accounts, to his wife, to the examiner in charge from the Office of the Comptroller of Currency ( OCC), to Federal Reserve regulators,
to US oil company management, to President Obiang himself were guilty of anti-money-laundering infractions (Coleman and Levin 2004). While there was brief protest in the streets of Malabo after Spanish television channels made this news quasi-public, the lasting legacy of the Riggs Bank scandal seems to have gone in several other directions, remaking the literal landscape in which public office and private accumulation might meet. First, as one of my friends managing a construction firm put it, “After Riggs, the government learned that they couldn’t just walk around with suitcases of cash; they had to find more nuanced ways of getting money.” Now, he went on to explain, the government pays radically inflated costs—on the order of 500 percent—to Chinese and Egyptian parastatal construction companies working on infrastructure projects. Subsequently, 80 percent of that inflated outlay goes to government officials as “kickbacks,” or indemnification (indemnizaciones). After Riggs, in other words, infrastructure projects took on new importance both as a visible sign of the public investment of petro-profit, and as public/private contracts through which money could still change hands under increased scrutiny. This is no longer a question of locally powerful individuals building prestigious homes or offering jobs to family members. The post-oil landscape of public office and private gain now implicates the American Federal Reserve Bank, US Senate subcommittee investigations, parastatal companies from around the world, millions of dollars, and massive infrastructure projects.

In the wake of the Riggs Bank scandal, the Government of Equatorial Guinea released a document in their own defense: “Statement of the People and Government of Equatorial Guinea in response to the report on Riggs Bank of the Permanent Subcommittee on Governmental Affairs of the Senate of the United States of America” (República de Guinea Ecuatorial 2005). This document offers another window into the effects of the subcommittee investigation. First, arguably buttressing my informant’s statement above about the role of infrastructure in post-Riggs forms of public/private accumulation, the last sixty-six pages of the document include tables of infrastructure projects, the companies responsible, and the costs, as well as “Some Investment Pictures,” as Annex IV is titled, with photos descriptively captioned: “View of Urbanization and Asphalting” or “Rehabilitation of Sendje Bridge.” These tables and photos are intended to document the licit forms of investment to which oil money has gone and to counter claims that government appointees appropriate all of the wealth. The first thirty-seven pages of the document offer a different illustration of the struggle over the licit modes of power and accumulation.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Grupo FADEM</td>
<td>Construction sheet metal roof, Loza Barrocks, Moganda</td>
<td>Bata</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>TECNOBAT GE</td>
<td>Construction Minascom Regional Offices</td>
<td>Bata</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>MANSO EXP</td>
<td>Land clearance</td>
<td>Bata</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>MANSO EXP</td>
<td>Maintenance lawn &amp; esplanade</td>
<td>Bata</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>ACCESEGE</td>
<td>Restoration of Mongamo Courthouse</td>
<td>Mongomo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>SOGEA</td>
<td>Reconditioning Mbini - Nume Highway</td>
<td>Mbini</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>SOGEA</td>
<td>Rehab. of sidewalks &amp; drainage</td>
<td>Mongomo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>PREGUIS S.L.</td>
<td>Refurb. of offices of Nat. Fed. of School &amp; Univ. Sports</td>
<td>Malabo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>EMPOCSA</td>
<td>Reconditioning of Nkoa-Ntoma barracks esplanade</td>
<td>Bata</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Const. MARIN</td>
<td>Refurbishment of Governor's residence</td>
<td>Luba</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>SOGECO</td>
<td>Reconditioning terrain La Paz Stadium</td>
<td>Malabo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>EMPOCSA</td>
<td>Reconditioning terrain Nsok Nzome Barracks</td>
<td>Nsok Nzome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Bur. VERITAS</td>
<td>Malabo station terminal</td>
<td>Malabo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>SOGECO</td>
<td>Widening Malabo-Airport highway, &amp; turnpikes</td>
<td>Malabo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>ISOLUIX WAT</td>
<td>Upgrading gas turbine power station to 20 megawatts</td>
<td>Malabo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Filyal</td>
<td>Enlargement of Acacio Mañé School</td>
<td>Malabo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>GRAL WORK</td>
<td>Enlargement of airport's aircraft parking facilities</td>
<td>Bata</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>BOUGUES</td>
<td>Enlargement of airport parking facilities</td>
<td>Malabo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>BOUGUES</td>
<td>Bridge-widening on Malabo - Basacato Highway</td>
<td>Malabo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>INCAT</td>
<td>Repair &amp; widening of Old Bridge</td>
<td>Malabo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>SOGECO</td>
<td>Asphalt access to garbage dump on Rebola highway</td>
<td>Malabo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>ECOCOSA</td>
<td>Asphalt Ngolo - Asonga Highway</td>
<td>Bata</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>SOGECO</td>
<td>Asphalt La Paz Street in Malabo &amp; 20 meter bridge</td>
<td>Malabo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>SOGECO</td>
<td>Asphalt seaside promenade Lote 1</td>
<td>Bata</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>SOGECO</td>
<td>Asphalt Rebola's main street &amp; square</td>
<td>Rebola</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>SOGECO</td>
<td>Asphalt streets in Los Angeles Neighborhood</td>
<td>Malabo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5.3. Infrastructure budget details in defense of Riggs bank scandal.
Reminiscent of Nigeria’s 1976 constitution, in which the authors drafted political power as “the opportunity to acquire riches and prestige, to be in a position to hand out benefits in the form of jobs, contracts, gifts of money, etc. to relations and political allies” (Bayart 2009, xvii; see also Simone 2004, 186), the Riggs Response document (2005) also seeks to sanction the conflation of public office and private accumulation, albeit with recognizably contemporary rhetoric of free markets, competition, efficiency, and “entrepreneurial flair”:

Article 29 of the Constitution of Equatorial Guinea establishes and defines the country’s economy as a free market economy, which guarantees economic freedom, recognizes private initiative, and promotes competition and efficiency. . . . Every single citizen, including the President of the Republic, has the right to engage in commerce and trade, because the constitution and the laws therefrom derived permit them to do so. Foreign legislation, such as that of the United States of America, is not in force and does not apply to Equatorial Guinea, and as a result can in no way prohibit the President of the Republic, Ministers, Civil Servants, Citizens, or foreign residents in Equatorial Guinea from undertaking business initiatives. . . . Persons in positions of authority are permitted to promote the creation of companies to be managed by third parties. . . . In the Republic of Equatorial Guinea, fellow family members of such Authorities are not prohibited from engagement in commerce (2). . . . The laws of the Republic of Equatorial Guinea do not prohibit any citizen, whether national or foreign, from developing their entrepreneurial flair in the country. (5; emphasis added)

At issue here are prevailing modes of wealth creation and distribution under new scrutiny, and the negotiation of those modes in the presence of both new, fabulous amounts of money, and new mechanisms and pressures through which that money must be distributed. The post-oil terrain on which these battles are fought is radically expanded beyond rural towns and family hiring practices to include not only the OCC, the Federal Reserve Bank, and the US Senate, but also Chinese and Egyptian construction parastatals and the disposition of private property required by their projects; US-based lobbyists newly active in drafting documents like the one quoted above; and the globally circulating claims of neoliberal capitalism itself—economic freedom, private initiative, competition and efficiency, and entrepreneurial flair.

Despite the boldness evinced in this document—an unapologetic validation of the wealth of the ruling elite and an aggressive assertion of sovereignty—the daily life of Equatorial Guinea’s public administration, and
the administration of the national economy in particular, was far more ambiguous. Citizens and state actors alike generally acknowledged the government’s pervasive failures not only in service provision, but also in the basic rituals that facilitate the provision of public services in the first place. I refer here again to the equivocal role of administrative procedures, including budgets and other forms of record-keeping, accounting, reporting, auditing, and monitoring—in general, to the ambivalent relationship of the state to procedures of administration and bureaucracy.

STATE FAILURE, PROCEDURALISM, AND A VISIT TO EDUARDO

After the futuristic confabulations of the main conference proceedings, all participants returned to the luxurious auditorium for a third day of concluding summaries. The conference participants seemed noticeably tired on this closing day. People straggled into the conference hall late, and there seemed to be fewer animated discussions in the hallways. Having spent the evenings between conference days discussing the historic event over dinners with Equatoguinean friends, our conversations too had grown tired, moving from early laughter at the impracticable goals, toward the torpor of long days and wasted time. After participants slowly filled the large hall that morning, we sat and sat, waiting for the president to appear, slowly sinking down in our chairs, wrinkling our clothing, and trying to hush our growling stomachs. I wrote in my notebook, “The future is exhausting.” Finally, the voice of the president’s protocol roused all of us from our slumps: “Su Excelencia, Jefe Del Gobierno,” and the president’s Moroccan security guards strode in before him. The audience clapped in rhythm, and Obiang joined in as he walked to his seat in the center of dignitaries and government ministers at the head table. And then, it was as if for a moment the impossibly heavy future gave way, and the present’s dystopia slipped in. In front of the president and others at the head table, government presenters elaborated on, with a bluntness that surprised me, the serious and obvious problems the country would have to overcome to achieve their future goals:

We are essentially without all basic social services. There is little to no running water, none of it potable. Electricity is sporadic in the cities, and not distributed throughout the territory. The health sector is essentially nonexistent for the majority of the country’s residents, and the education sector is little better. There is no transparent access to credit for small businesses, and no
regularized process according to which one might start a business. There is a total lack of legal instruments or regulation in any and all sectors. There are serious problems with private property and contract law. There is no state contract law or set of laws regarding the quality of work done.

There is no state contract law. There is a total lack of legal instruments. These statements do not solely, or even centrally, describe a corrupt state. This is a description of the depth of imperial debris through which US oil companies profitably traipse. This is a description of the spectacular profit to be made in the not-yets of liberalism. The depth and breadth of the problems described by government presenters that morning raise the question of the relationship between so-called corruption and the daily life of administrative work. If the problems are this deep, can the conflation of public office and private gain fully account for them? What about the daily life of service provision, the making and implementation of legal instruments, or regulation? National economies are built not only at the interface of forms of licit accumulation, but also by the mundane procedures of budget-making and record-keeping. Conference documents from both 1997 and 2007 dwell at length on bureaucratic chaos, complicating a picture of simple corruption:

More than corruption, Equatorial Guinea suffers from the absence of the procedures and tools of administration that facilitate the control of spending and limit the risk of the diversion of funds. It seems that Equatorial Guinea has not benefitted from an administrative tradition, allowing the country to construct a truly structured State. The modern Equatoguinean administration is still to be built (República de Guinea Ecuatorial 2007a, 42). (Parece que Guinea Ecuatorial no se haya beneficiado de una tradición administrativa, permitiéndole construir un Estado verdaderamente estructurado. La administración Ecuatoguineana moderna queda por construir.)

As if to drive home the extent of what exactly remains to be built, another document narrates a bafflingly vast series of required reforms. Under the heading “Implement Quality Governance at the Service of Citizens,” the list includes, among other directives: (1) launch a planning state and a modern administration; (2) revise the legislative framework; (3) reform the judicial system; (4) encourage the participation and representation of citizens; and (5) secure the respect for human rights (República de Guinea Ecuatorial 2007b, 10–11). The documentation from the 1997 conference details a series of implementations agreed to by the government that are equally shocking, given the absences they acknowledge. To paraphrase: The government will propose
legislation to ensure that accounting procedures and financial and regulatory laws are followed, backed by the threat of external audit. The government will introduce new rules and procedures to control the budget process and identify the functionaries responsible for discrete actions through the process. The budgets of every agency will be identified, and the financial administration at departmental levels will be improved (República de Guinea Ecuatorial 1997, 28; emphasis added). In other words, in 1997 there was no legislation requiring the monitoring of accounting or other financial procedures, nor were there codified processes that separated agencies by budgets, or budgets by responsible party. Thinking back again to this “first” conference, these documents show, again, how newly circulating oil wealth demanded these procedures be put in place. To give one more example from the 1997 document, an adopted reform under the heading “The Function of the Treasury” reads: “The government will seek the necessary technical assistance to develop and design the systems, processes, and procedures of control for spending and [accounting]. This will allow the Treasury to maintain accounts for all agencies collecting and spending public funds” (29). In a country where public funds are of a piece with private investment, what is a national economy in the absence of national budget accounting procedures or of national treasury accounts separated by agencies collecting and spending public funds? And what does it mean to try to make one, when suddenly billions of dollars are pouring in, and yet the treasury has long operated somewhere between Nzeng Ayong and Riggs Bank? It was in conversations with Eduardo that I began to think through these questions.

Without house numbers and with only a few main streets named, it was often a challenge to find unfamiliar destinations in Malabo. The orienting landmark Eduardo had given to find his house was a well-known pepe soup restaurant. Friends and field interlocutors had long explained that Eduardo did not talk to just anyone, so I had waited until late in my fieldwork to approach him, when I finally felt I had a list of informed questions that might be worthy of his time (and when I knew my way around the city!). A scholarly lawyer long active in opposition politics, Eduardo was understandably cagey about those to whom he granted an audience, and why. Despite all my careful preparation, approaching the pepe soup restaurant I was nervous that he would regret the invitation. When I finally found the corner store that marked his building and walked up a flight of stairs to the second-floor apartment, a young man greeted me, opening double doors to a shocking site: books. Books! Eduardo’s airy, high-ceilinged flat was lined floor-to-ceiling with bookshelves, and still more books covered the floor in
inclining piles. And papers! Stacks of papers and files leaned this way and
that, covering and spilling off of available surfaces onto the tiled floor. That
the sight of so many books—philosophy, history, political theory, law, and
literature—caught me off guard has stayed with me for a long time. Beyond
attention to knowledge production, as anthropologists we also must attend
to the histories, uses, and relationships to specific kinds of knowledge in
specific places—he, the kind to be found in books in a country with no
bookstores. Indeed, in one sense, the idea of a “national economy” is but a
representation of accumulated information; however, it’s not merely the con-
tent of that information that matters, but also what information as a cate-
gory means, and to whom, at the intersection of a country where being an
intellectual was reason to be put to death for a time and an industry wherein
agnatology is often the order of the day (Appel et al. 2015).

I sat amid the books to ask Eduardo questions about oil’s more intimate
histories in local politics, and he began by telling me an origin story that I
recount various times throughout this book. The late 1980s and early 1990s
were a time of deep economic and political crisis in Equatorial Guinea. Ex-
ternal debt levels were among the highest on the continent, and Obiang’s
regime, in power for ten years at that point, was under mounting pressure
from a strong and newly unified opposition, emboldened by pressure from
the international community. Chester Norris was the American ambassador
to Equatorial Guinea during these years, between 1988 and 1991. During his
tenure, Norris acted openly as the intermediary between local political fig-
ures and new American oil interests in the country. Walter International was
the first American production company to produce oil in Equatorial Guinea,
and Chester Norris served as their representative. In 2009, Avenida Ches-
ter Norris was one of the few named streets in the city, alongside Avenida
Hassan II, after the Moroccan King whose kingdom has provided Obiang
with his most trusted security guards. According to Eduardo, the money
from those early contracts brokered by Norris went directly, personally, to
Obiang (see chapter 3).

Many in Equatorial Guinea and within oil companies themselves will
readily admit that the early days of oil contracts were full of personalized
dealings and “irregularities,” and most will end these stories by explain-
ing that now all that has changed. Whether oil companies now face more
public scrutiny or have undergone meaningful reforms in the post-Enron/
Sarbanes-Oxley moment is unclear, and whether local power holders have
learned to deal differently with transnational corporations or were merely
chastened by Riggs Bank is also unclear. Regardless, actors on both sides
generally admit to early transgressions in order to demonstrate contempo-
rary compliance, reminiscent of Baudrillard’s (2001) critique of capital stag-
ing its own death: “It is always a question of proving the real by the imagi-
nary; proving truth by scandal; proving the law by transgression. . . . Power 
can stage its own murder to rediscover a glimmer of existence and legiti-
macy” (179).

Rather than explaining to me how things had changed since Obiang, and 
perhaps Norris himself, pocketed Walter International’s money, Eduardo 
took a different turn in our conversation. He walked across the room and 
reached into the middle of a paper mountain, returning to our seats by the 
window with a thick, dog-eared sheaf in hand. Shaking the stack as antici-
pator punctuation, Eduardo spoke in a whisper so intense that it seemed 
to emanate more from the desire to keep from yelling than to not be heard. 
“Money from petroleum exploitation didn’t appear in state budget docu-
ments until 2005! Look for the budgets from 2002, 2003, and 2004. Petro-
leum money does not appear!”

The stacks Eduardo held were national budget documents stretching 
from 2004 to 2007. As he flipped through them, he narrated his close read-
ings of these budgets faster than I could take notes. Roughly 50 percent of an-
nual budgets go into a category of “investments,” of which the largest portion 
is construction and infrastructure (recalling the post-Riggs moment of pub-
lic office and private gain, above). While the budget documents contained 
long lists of these projects and their projected costs, there was no proof or 
information indicating whether these projects had, in fact, been completed, 
nor were there numbers regarding their actual costs once completed. Edu-
ardo’s voice rose and he looked me in the eyes:

There are paragraphs that say, “We don’t know where this money goes.” There are sectors of the administration where the money does not enter the treasury. They are essentially saying here [while stabbing the document an-
grily with his pointer finger] that the money made by the government from the sale of national territory does not enter the treasury! These are reflections of inner-regime conflicts, but the document is still approved! There is no follow-through or monitoring. People in the regime with personal conflicts have suffered trying to develop accurate budget documents. [These docu-
ments] are a confession of the impotence of those who work in the Ministry of Finance.

As we sat and talked our way through the documents, the story that 
began to emerge most forcefully was of Equatorial Guinea’s parastatals—
legally separate entities created by the government to undertake commercial activities. These entities are largely funded by the government, but ostensibly operate with some degree of autonomy. (National oil companies are famous examples of parastatals, such as Saudi Arabia’s Aramco or Brazil’s Petrobras. Within the US context, Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac are other, now notorious, examples.) Starting with the story of Bata Ports, a parastatal in charge of port administration in Bata, Eduardo explained that in 2006 they received a government subsidy of 100 million CFA (about US$200,000), 100 percent of which was unaccounted for. Did they deposit it in the treasury? Where did it go? And, more pointedly, who might dare to follow up on these questions? He went on to explain that a host of institutions, including the university, the social security administration, and the national gas company, were never asked to account for the money they received from the government. But with opposition pressure on this point starting in 2006, these institutions began to bring budgets to the table. “These are like feuds,” Eduardo explained. “When Obiang names someone [to lead an institution], they just use their appointment as an opportunity for private accumulation.” “But surely,” I said, “there’s more than avarice at work here.” I talked about my experiences in the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative process (documented in chapter 6), noting that there were radically different levels of bureaucratic competence in the ministries. While a few people I worked with clearly had the training to produce complex budget documentation (training that I do not have), others definitely did not; even among those who did, many felt that crunching numbers on Excel spreadsheets was menial work compared to their daily tasks of face-to-face meetings where agreements were brokered and work actually got done. “So, how much does procedural competence have to do with it?” I asked. “How much expertise is there in the formalities and procedures of budget-making?” Citing Chabal and Daloz’s Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument (1999), Eduardo responded, “This disorder, this incompetence—which incompetent people are appointed to these posts it’s on purpose. It is using disorder as a political instrument.”

I left Eduardo’s house as the sun was setting and the harmattan sky was deepening to dusky orange. I was dizzy from the hurried flipping through documents full of numbers and charts, accompanied by Eduardo’s fervent narration. I was anxious about what an anthropological eye/ear might be able to bring to bear on documents so central to the national economy cosmos. Before leaving his house, I had asked if I might photocopy the documents we had gone over so that I could study them at greater length and then
come back to him with further questions. He agreed, on the condition that I come back the next day to pick them up, to give him the chance to organize the documents and take note of what he had lent me. When I returned to Eduardo’s house the next day, he was out, but the same young man who had so quietly ushered me into the book-filled room passed me five bursting manila envelopes of documents that I took to a small ciber—an establishment that rented time on computers and happened to have a copy machine, as well. The Cameroonian clerk and I laughed and joked and talked about soccer as he took out the documents. But as soon as he saw the contents of what he was about to photocopy, he grew reticent and asked me if I worked for the government. I boldly said that I did not and that I was doing a research project. Our conversation ended abruptly there, and I sat for a few hours watching the afternoon fade into night as he taciturnly copied and collated the materials.

Pouring over these documents, I indeed found the problems to which Eduardo drew my attention. The documents limn the cracks and internal tensions of an ostensibly monolithic and smoothly kleptocratic regime. Of the National University (UNGE), a 2006 document reads, “This institution lacks both accounting books and basic notions of accounting. This situation does not permit us to have reliable data” (República de Guinea Ecuatorial 2006a, 17). The same document three years later says of the university, “Despite the presentation of budgets that don’t even minimally respect the established criteria, [La UNGE] has never justified the use of the funds put at their disposal by the government” (República de Guinea Ecuatorial 2009, 6). By 2009, according to the Ministry of Finance responsible for these documents, the university had yet to produce a roster detailing how many professors it had on payroll and their salaries. Despite this lack of personnel records, the document notes that in UNGE’s anticipated budget for 2009, “there are 122 professors who do not appear on the remitted payroll” (República de Guinea Ecuatorial 2009, 6).

Concerning the National Institute for Business Promotion and Development (INPYDE)—a particularly relevant institution given the general thrust of the Horizon 2020 plan—the budget document contemptuously reports: “This institution that advocates business promotion and development seems to be marginal to the realization of these activities. During the fiscal year that closed on December 31st, 2005, this institution had not accomplished a single activity of their own that advocated business promotion and/or development. . . . Of the 195 million CFA subsidy INPYDE received [roughly US$400,000], 62% went to pay personnel, 10.8% went to education even
though they did not hold a single seminar, and 8.7% went to travel costs” (República de Guinea Ecuatorial 2009, 18).

Concerning the Bioko Chamber of Commerce, Agriculture, and Forestry’s final reported numbers, the 2005 budget document reads that “these results are fictitious and paradoxical when it is known that the Chamber is in debt to BGFI Bank for 335 million CFA” (República de Guinea Ecuatorial 2005, 19). And finally, in a document intended to review all submitted budgets of all parastatals from 2005 to 2009, it indicates that GEProyectos—the entity ostensibly responsible for all infrastructure projects nationwide—had submitted no budget data in four years. “This company has not remitted any information about the execution of its budgets” (República de Guinea Ecuatorial 2009, 10). Nevertheless, 2009’s anticipated national budget showed that GEProyectos was to receive a 200 percent increase in its government subsidy.

Despite Eduardo’s insistence on the intentional and strategic use of disorder, even this perfunctory glance at thousands of pages of budget documents reveals both an internally fractured regime and its ambivalence about the role of procedures and techniques of administration, accounting in particular. At the very least, we see the Ministry of Finance openly critiquing responsible parties at the National University and the National Institute for Business Promotion and Development, arguably trivial institutions in terms of both budget allocations and political clout. However, when that criticism extends to the information provided by the national gas company and GEProyectos, the friction takes on increased political weight. Moreover, from both the National Economic Conference and the National Budget documentation, I want to insist on the significance of statements about bureaucratic procedures. If the National University “lacks both accounting books and basic notions of accounting,” and if, by their own admission, in 2007 the government had not adopted “procedures and tools of administration that facilitate the control of spending and limit the risk of the diversion of funds,” then there is more to be said than simply that “new” or “Western” forms of accounting and accountability came in with oil that were in tension with local forms that worked in the past. Rather, local political conflicts and their minimal room for maneuver are expressed through who may or may not be fluent in “basic notions of accounting.”

Although, as Eduardo tells it, there is no one in the government who would dare to follow up on these arguably shocking “irregularities,” the Ministry of Finance still ends the document by daring the Parliament to
pass these budgets: “We present [the results] to this highest legislative body, to determine whether or not to validate the budgets presented by these Autonomous State Entities, despite the preliminary conclusions reached by the Ministry of Finance and Budgets” (República de Guinea Ecuatorial 2006a, 20). Looking at ethnographic data at this level alerts us to the relationship between broader political economic analysis—complicity among US banking and regulatory systems, transnational oil companies, and various dictatorial regimes—and the minutiae and infighting in the more localized daily practices of accounting and budget validation.

If Equatorial Guinea’s national economy is made at the intersection of political infighting, insufficiency in basic accounting techniques, and spectacular accumulation, then what is this fetishized object? “Economic expertise is forced largely to overlook . . . leakage, network, energy, control, violence, and irrationality,” as Mitchell (2002) writes.

It does not take them seriously, for that is not its task. The role of economics is to help make possible the economy by articulating the rules, understandings, and equivalences out of which the economic is made. . . . This has been its impossible project. . . . This self-deception is essential, for otherwise it would have to follow these links, powers, and leakages, and admit that there could be no economy. (300)

In other words, despite all this leakage, violence, and transnational irrationality, there is an “Equatoguinean” economy in the name of which the eternal deferral of the future is justified; the government signs contracts worth billions of dollars; and carnivalesque conferences are convened and convened again.

**CONCLUSION**

There is an enduring tension—epitomized in the national economy form, but stretching far beyond it—between the messy daily practices of national budget-making and the authoritative work those eventual forms do in the world; between the dystopian histories and presents of life in Equatorial Guinea and the utopian futures imagined in an idealized private sector, or a disembodied and diversified national economy. In negotiating this tension, I have tried to avoid the approach of simply demonstrating the ways in which concrete national economies differ from economists’ “abstract” national economies (Callon 1998; MacKenzie et al. 2007; Miyazaki 2013;
Holmes 2014; Appel 2017). Instead, I have proceeded on the understanding that “the economy is an artifactual body—a fabrication, yes, but as solid as other fabricated objects, and as incomplete” (Mitchell 2002, 301). Once we can hold both poles of the artifactual simultaneously, the solidity and the incompleteness, then we can shift analytic attention to the spaces opened up by these tensions in the world: productive spaces of misrepresentation, simplification, forgetting, and confabulation, in which powerful objects like “national economies” come to exercise much of their power. If, for instance, every country everywhere has a national economy, whose historical trajectories and potential futures can be compared, avoided, or emulated by employing authoritative economic and political tools like the resource curse, then we end up with dream spaces like the National Economic Conference I attended and the reverberations of an idealized private sector far outside conference walls. Involvement in a matchlessly lucrative sector of global trade like the oil industry compounds both the surrealism and the productivity of these spaces, as it requires intensified negotiation with new forms and geographies of legibility, licit accumulation, accounting, demography, record-keeping, the disposition of private property, and contract law, among others. These negotiations make Equatorial Guinea into a place from which hydrocarbons can be extracted and exported licitly, even as they retrench translocal forms of power, inequality, and rule. Central to these negotiations, then, is the alienability of hydrocarbon and its associated profits from Equatorial Guinea, epistemologically the same space of separation required between a national economy and the aggregate transactions and histories it can and cannot represent.

That it was the resource curse that enframed these temporal and spatial separations at 2007’s National Economic Conference is particularly demonstrative, because at its core this body of theory is about the entanglement of oil money with local power structures. Because of the narrow focus on money, the suggestion is that this entanglement is somehow only “in” the national economy—the revenue from oil is misused; revenue streams aren’t diversified. The antidotes, similarly, become located “in” national economy fixes, for which the national government is solely responsible. But given the four preceding chapters, we can see the much more complicated daily life of the entanglements of the US oil industry with local power—entanglements in contracting and subcontracting regimes, infrastructure, labor, and enclaved corporate and residential life, all of which are required long before oil and gas circulate back into national economies as money.
The 2007 conference literature ends with two appendices that describe other national economies worth emulating. The first explains Dubai’s twenty-three-year transition away from an economy solely reliant on oil:

In 1990, Dubai’s government confronted their economic dependency on fossil fuels, and decided to begin a conversion to new technologies, commerce, and luxury commercial ventures. In fifteen years, petroleum’s contribution to GNP fell from 80% to 10%. Dubai’s accelerated development was possible thanks to the voluntary recourse to foreign workers at all levels . . . to cover the country’s central necessities. This translated into extremely simplified procedures for business contracts and the hiring of foreign workers. In 2003, 84% of Dubai’s population was immigrants, 71% of which were men. (República de Guinea Ecuatorial 2007a, 71)

The second narrates Singapore’s forty-year rise from “a third world island without resources” to “a true global economic dragon”:

The development of this island without resources was based essentially in the development of strong public infrastructure and the creation of an especially favorable business climate: Policies to attract foreign investment; A reliable judicial system that protects property rights; The most efficient and least expensive manual labor among developed countries; Prestigious business schools administrated by Harvard; Perfect control of trade logistics; Logistical efficiency at air and sea ports. . . . Singapore surely owes its success to the great visionary Lee Kwan Yew, who knew to use his authoritarianism for the singular purpose of forging a common identity from a multiethnic society. In this way, he was able to inculcate concepts of Asian values including the primacy of the collective over the individual, the benefit of consensus, work, and savings into the population. (República de Guinea Ecuatorial 2007a, 72; emphasis added)

These disembodied pasts, offered as Equatorial Guinea’s desired futures, perfectly illustrate the fantasy of something called a “national economy,” an object that enables the framing of “collective growth or decline, and remedies for improvement, all in terms of what seemed a legible series of measurements, goals, and comparisons” (Mitchell 2002, 272). Dubai offers a model in which local power holders would never have to respond to the small businessman’s popular plea for access to credit or capital, but could continue and even expand the “extremely simplified procedures for business contracts and the hiring of foreign workers” like body shopping and pay according to na-
tion of origin (República de Guinea Ecuatorial 2007a, 71). Singapore offers a model in which a combination of authoritarianism and orientalist essentialism pave the way for the Harvard-approved “perfect” control of trade logistics, a judicial system that seems to protect only private property rights, and the most efficient port in the world.

These false equivalences and disavowals of historical connection enabled by the national economy form—the same in Singapore, Dubai, and Equatorial Guinea—are precisely the effects of macroeconomic tools like GDP or national growth rate when laid across postcolonial inequality. While these tools offer an expert language of comparability and potential equality, they also legitimize and dehistoricize radical inequality, rendering hierarchies of global supremacy licit in scientific language (Speich 2011; Appel 2017). The particular violence of the national economy form in the global South, and the enrolling of economic theories like the resource curse in that violence, entreat ethnographic attention. Independence-era Senegalese political leaders Mamadou Dia and Léopold Senghor were prescient in their concerns that, even as they fought for political independence from France, relational inequality between colonizers and soon-to-be nation-states would not be undone by “nominal independence” in a world they insisted was increasingly interdependent (Cooper 2015, 68; see also Pierre 2013; Ralph 2015). The sequelae of their concerns live on, here in National Economic Conferences in Equatorial Guinea, and thrumming in those moments when world and representation are not one; when development plans and economic theory occlude transnational corporate power; and when performativity is not so complete that the model becomes the world. These are the spaces of political possibility within the foreclosures of modern politics. To find them is to participate in the classic ethnographic project of making the familiar strange: “Given the centrality of the economy to modernist social representations . . . it is necessary to defamiliarize the economy as feminists have denaturalized the body, as one step toward generating alternative social conceptions and allowing new political subjectivities to be born” (Gibson-Graham 2006, 97).