The Licit Life of Capitalism
Appel, Hannah

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The Licit Life of Capitalism: US Oil in Equatorial Guinea.
As I have shared the research on which this book is based in presentations and publications over the last five or six years, I’m often met with differing versions of these questions: What is the solution? What is the solution to the deep complicity between US oil companies and repressive regimes like Obiang’s? What is the solution to the incantation—water schools electricity healthcare—that haunts too many resource-rich countries with the repeating specter of squandered oil revenues? And of course, far beyond this book, the serial horrors of the transnational oil industry in the global South, in particular, also provoke the question: What is the solution? For people and organizations variously invested in and effected by extractive industries, transparency is often the answer. Forcing open the ledgers of infamously secretive transnational corporations and the governments with whom they collude, the idea goes, will reveal the flows of oil revenue—from whom and to whom—to the public, and thus better enable that public to claim their fair share for running water, healthcare, infrastructure development, and education. This is the (mostly implicit) theory of politics embedded in the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) documented in this chapter and epistemologies of transparency more broadly.
This theory of politics as transparency—liberal through and through—is also a theory of social change; that is, if you disclose information, perhaps if you can show that $28 billion is missing (as the EITI process revealed to much fanfare in Nigeria), then a cascade of political change will follow. Hetherington (2011) offers a useful summary of the political theory undergirding transparency:

If authoritarianism was built on the state’s control of information, then democracy is to be built by giving citizens access to, and indeed control over and responsibility for, all information. This ultimately is what a transparent society is supposed to look like: all state knowledge is public knowledge, and citizens can therefore “see” what goes on in government and in the economy, not directly, but by receiving information about it. Transparency is information so complete that it seems unmediated; it is an access to the real through a medium so perfect as to disappear from the scene it is describing. This can never be realized, but remains always the ideal: a world of perfect information in which citizens and entrepreneurs can make fully informed decisions about how to organize their society. Capable at last of choosing rationally among political and market options, governments will be held accountable, corruption will decrease accordingly, and markets will become more efficient, leading to better growth, and hoisting developing countries out of poverty. (6–7)

This theory of political change, in turn, has embedded within it a series of assumptions—an already-assembled public simply waiting for information, an already sorted-out national economy, or the very fact of a nationally organized order of things separate from transnational corporations. In other words, transparency is at once an enormous industry and a gravely false conclusion. It is how liberal politics is imagined but doesn’t work. After all that this book has recounted about the quotidian violence of liberal capitalism—from the segregated spaces on which it depends, to the gross inequalities of the contract form, to the chimeric yet serial “national economy”—there is a special irony to ending with, or to imagine that politics ends with, transparency.

This chapter, the last full ethnographic chapter in the book, uses the EITI process as it unfolded in Equatorial Guinea between 2006 and 2008 to return to the question of political possibility. Watching the EITI process unfold ethnographically allows a grounded critique of liberal theologies of social and political change, and shows that our epistemologies of capitalism—how we come to understand it and to see it—affect how we might seek to
change it. I begin by explaining how I came to be so intimately involved in Equatorial Guinea’s EITI process and offer a brief, emic overview of what the global EITI program aims to do. Thereafter, I move quickly through the literature on transparency before offering a detailed account of the first EITI meeting in Equatorial Guinea, eventually held in November 2007. The remainder of this chapter weaves in and out of meetings among civil society groups, oil companies, the Equatoguinean government, and foreign consultants that took place between November 2007 and June 2008, to think about politics and the political, before transitioning to the book’s conclusion on the quotidian violence of liberalism, and political possibilities within and against capitalism.

Insofar as this book is an exploration of the more general forms and processes—the offshore, contracts, infrastructures, something called “the” economy—that facilitate diverse capitalist projects around the world, this chapter adds another such form. Transparency is often invoked as the antidote not just to the ravages of extractive industries, but also to the excesses of capitalism more generally. Indeed, like the NGOs that so often take transparency as their rallying cry, transparency-as-solution is now in dialectical relation to capitalism itself—a permanent structural feature of it (Kirsch 2014). Thus, the mandate this book attempts to fulfill—to know capitalism ethnographically—is also, today, a mandate to know transparency.

**THE EXTRACTIVE INDUSTRIES TRANSPARENCY INITIATIVE**

During my first week of long-term fieldwork in Malabo, I was discussing my project over lunch with Alfredo (the Equatoguinean economist with whom I recounted a conversation about audit, corporate governance, and the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act in chapter 1) and a group of five or six other Equatoguineans, all of whom had recently returned from lives and educations abroad. Upon his return to Equatorial Guinea from postgraduate study and employment in London, Alfredo had worked first for the Major Corporation; by the time I arrived in Equatorial Guinea, he was working for Regal Energy. This was our first meeting (it would be months before our conversation on corporate governance), and it was basically a fieldwork networking lunch, in which we were getting to know one another and I was asking for other Equatoguinean contacts in and around the industry who might be willing to talk with me. As I rambled about my interest in the relationships among international capital, the state, and Equatoguinean citizens, Alfredo practically cried out...
that I had to work with Isabel, who was also sitting among our large group at lunch. He introduced us.

Only a few years older than me, Isabel had recently returned to Equatorial Guinea from a life abroad. When we met that day, she was working as a director—essentially a high-level technocrat—in the Ministry of Finance and Budgets. In addition to her work at the ministry, Isabel ran a consulting business, helping potential international investors navigate Equatorial Guinea’s murky investment waters. It was clear why Alfredo had steered me to her. Isabel was young, open, hyper-educated, and worldly. (Over lunch, it became clear that she was fluent in Spanish, English, French, German, and Bubi.) She and I agreed to meet formally to discuss possible collaborations, and a week or so later in her consultancy office, she offered me a participant observation position at her side. She would give me access to past and present state budget and finance documents, laws, decrees, and other documentation—notionally “public” information, but practically impossible to find. She would also bring me with her to the upcoming Second National Economic Conference and offered participation (as I found it interesting) in her consultancy work, helping her design small, field-based research projects on various subsectors. (X company wants to invest in the health sector. What are the needs there? How does the government solicit bids? Who wins and why? What companies are already working in that sector?)

Isabel was also the government functionary recently appointed to lead Equatorial Guinea’s national Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, which was scheduled to begin the following month. Tasked with the enormous bureaucratic labor of this initiative, in addition to her functionary duties in the ministry and her consulting business responsibilities, Isabel was overwhelmed by her workload and offered me full access to the EITI process—meetings, correspondence, document drafting, and the World Bank consultancy relationship—in exchange for what turned out to be periodic full-time work from me, at least as meetings or external EITI deadlines approached. In response to Isabel’s generous offer, I let her know that I was most interested in working with and for her on the EITI process, although I was willing to help out elsewhere as necessary. Ultimately, it was in part through my work for her on EITI that I gained access to oil company management, high-level Equatoguinean bureaucrats, much of the book’s document-based analysis, and more. But what is it that I had signed up for?

What is the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative?

Launched in 2002 by Tony Blair, then prime minister of the UK, the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative is an effort backed by the G8,
the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank, among other multilateral institutions, to promote what they see as good governance and fiscal transparency in resource-rich countries. The EITI process ostensibly differentiates itself from other G8, IMF, and World Bank agreements and accords—structural adjustment comes to mind—by being a voluntary program, nominally led by the national governments that choose to sign on to the process. Between EITI’s inception in 2002 and Equatorial Guinea’s entrance into the process in 2007, twenty-four countries had endorsed or were implementing EITI. Among these twenty-four, fifteen countries had met the four criteria for “candidate country” status, including Azerbaijan, Cameroon, Gabon, Ghana, Guinea, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Mongolia, Niger, Nigeria, Peru, and Yemen. The nine remaining countries of the twenty-four, including Equatorial Guinea, as well as Chad, Congo, Congo DRC, Madagascar, Sao Tome and Principe, Timor L’este, and Trinidad and Tobago, were in the process of completing basic implementation criteria. Between its 2002 inception and 2007, no country had been fully validated as EITI “compliant.”

What does EITI do? Or more accurately for the moment, what does it intend to do? In short, the program proposes an accounting-based cure for the resource curse that the Second National Economic Conference set out to diagnose. The following description of the EITI program appeared in the sourcebook we received in Equatorial Guinea in 2007:

In many countries, money from oil, gas, and mining is associated with poverty, conflict, and corruption. Commonly referred to as the “resource curse,” this is often driven by a lack of transparency and accountability around the payments that companies are making to governments, and the revenues that governments are receiving from those companies. The Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) seeks to create that missing transparency and accountability. It is a voluntary initiative, supported by a coalition of companies, governments, investors, and civil society organizations. Alongside other efforts to improve transparency in government budget practice, the EITI begins a process whereby citizens can hold their governments to account for the use of those revenues. (EITI Sourcebook, March 2005)

In short, the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative is a protracted exercise in account balancing, designed to reconcile “the payments that companies are making to governments, and the revenues that governments are receiving from those companies.” (Note again in this description the narrow oil-as-money approach and the same liberal myopia about national govern-
ments as sources of pathology.) Companies and governments report those payments and revenues to a mutually agreed-upon auditor, referred to as an “aggregator” in EITI lingo. The aggregator is appointed to reconcile oil companies’ accounts of how much money they have paid to a government with that government’s accounts of how much they have received from the companies. (Proposed aggregator names floating around Equatorial Guinea as the process began included PricewaterhouseCoopers and Ernst & Young.)

As of 2007, EITI defined a compliant country as one in which “(1) an aggregator from an internationally recognized firm has been selected; (2) oil companies have disclosed their government payments to this individual; (3) governments have separately disclosed their revenue to this individual, at which point; (4) she or he will reconcile the figures, identify discrepancies, and recommend improvements. A public report of the auditor’s findings will be disseminated, and the country will then undergo another external validation process to be labeled ‘compliant’” (World Bank 2008).

In any version of this modular EITI process, there are three “stakeholder groups”: the given national government (because it signs the hydrocarbon contracts, as detailed in chapter 3); the extractive industry companies (both foreign and national); and “civil society.” In its self-descriptions, the EITI process offers each group potential benefits from successful implementation. The promise to a given government is that the better management of resource revenue will lead to economic and political stability, which in turn will prevent the conflict found in so many resource-rich regions. A successfully completed EITI process also offers the government “an improved investment climate . . . providing a clear signal to investors and international financial institutions that the government is committed to greater transparency” (EITI Sourcebook, March 2005, 5). Benefits to accrue to extraction companies include the mitigation of reputational risk, a clear and public demonstration of their contribution to a given country’s economy (as their payments to the government are made public), and the mitigation of conflict, hence the greater possibility of returns on the capital-intensive, long-term investments required by many natural resource projects. Finally, EITI promises civil society more information in the public domain about the revenues that accrue to their government from extraction, which in turn may enable citizens to make more demands on those revenues and make governments more accountable to those they govern. While the EITI process does not technically encompass how mineral revenue is spent by the government (only that they do indeed receive it and in what amount), the wider scope of the program (then known as EITI ++) allows a platform for that discussion,
and some countries have used the EITI process to bring issues of revenue allocation into public debate.

While I offer an analysis of the EITI program and transparency more broadly throughout this chapter, I want to note for now Strathern’s (2000) insight about accountability’s “dual credentials in moral reasoning and in the methods and precepts of financial accounting” (1). Mary Poovey (1998) has made similar observations about the moral histories of double-entry bookkeeping. In the EITI program, against the perception that both oil companies and the Equatoguinean state intentionally obfuscate revenue and investment information, EITI offers a platform for transparent accounts (in the dual sense) of how much money there is and where it is going. Accountability, this program suggests, is to be found, or at least initiated, in accounting.

ON TRANSPARENCY

Critiques of transparency are widespread in anthropology and beyond, including a few authors who have written about the EITI process specifically. Andrew Barry (2008) has called EITI’s intentionally delimited and depoliticized accounting process “a form of political microscopy” which enables an assembly to examine a surface which has been prepared for it to inspect” (7). This critique of transparency as microscopy—looking at a radically delimited and prepared surface in place of politics—has its roots in Power (1997), Strathern (2000), and others who urge us to look for what the visibility allegedly provided by transparency processes conceals (Roberts 2009, 962). (See Ballestero 2012 for a helpful overview.) Not without humor, Barry (2013) points out that Azerbaijan was the first country to be validated in the EITI process in 2009, the same year in which the country was ranked 143rd on Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index. In the midst of these apparent contradictions, Shore and Wright (2015) worry that transparency processes like EITI “recast political programs as mundane administrative and technical matters to be dealt with by experts, thereby masking their ideological content and removing them from the realm of contestable politics” (421). (See also Burchell 1993; Shore and Wright 1997.)

One of the most interesting features of these critiques of transparency is how widely held they are, including by practitioners themselves. Despite transparency’s staying power as development dogma, even as other tenets of hardline neoliberal reform have been abandoned, Strathern notes that “what is odd about our embrace of transparency is that ‘everyone knows’ about its inadequacies: that transparency involves a simplistic abstraction...
and decontextualization from the complexity of the world” (in Roberts 2009, 968). Indeed, as has been the case for many of the forms and processes of capitalism explored in this book, abstraction and decontextualization are not accidents or shortcomings in the EITI process. Rather they are, in large part, intentional, even aspirational qualities. When it comes to revenue from natural resources, the EITI process intentionally keeps “politics”—corruption, kleptocracy, violence, collusion—out of the audit frame, with the idea (often implicit) that this might create a safe space in which to talk politics by other means.

In Equatorial Guinea, a place where politics cannot be spoken in public, the delimiting that came with the EITI process—where the mandate was to talk only about revenue in and revenue out—was actually drawing new territory, new spaces for contestation and debate that were not there before. Nearly every ethnographic account of transparency processes has found similar effects. As Ballestero (2012) writes: “There are plenty of circumstances . . . in which the utility of indicators lies in their capacity to create a new entity, one that [was] unspeakable before the quantification exercise [was] performed. This capacity to make entities speakable . . . requires a rethinking of transparency-creation arrangements in light of their multiple productivities” (164). Barry (2013) and Hetherington (2011) came to similar conclusions. Regarding the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline, Barry argues that the work of transparency, in fact, fosters new forms of dispute. Hetherington too notes that “the practices of representation that go into creating transparency are saturated at every turn with precisely that aspect of social life that they are meant to get rid of: politics. Indeed, far from stabilizing information, these larger technical networks create new spaces for disagreement and contestation” (7). The EITI process in Equatorial Guinea also illustrates this productivity, multivalence, and, indeed, unruliness of an ostensibly delimited and delimiting process.

While depoliticizing microscopy was certainly present in the EITI process as it unfolded in Equatorial Guinea during 2007 and 2008, it was only as a haunted hope, a wished-for horizon. Over more than a year of Equatorial Guinea’s intensive participation in the EITI program, the process never got anywhere close to auditing or accounting. Rather, participants struggled through messy, embodied questions, including Who really is civil society in Equatorial Guinea, where it is technically illegal to meet in large groups without explicit government permission? How can we reconcile the advice and guidebooks of transnational experts with Equatoguinean daily life? Is an overtly depoliticized process the only method through which to openly
address political questions at the crossroads of the US oil industry and Obiang’s regime? In other words, EITI did not produce anything close to the outcome for which it was designed, nor did the mandate to focus on accounting successfully limit the parameters of the program to those envisioned in advance. Consider how the first meeting unfolded—literally came undone at every possible edge—as a case in point.

**THE FIRST EITI MEETING**

At my first official meeting with Isabel in late October 2007, she told me that the initial gathering of the EITI “civil society” stakeholder group would take place in less than two weeks. She asked if I would be willing to give a presentation at that meeting on the concept of civil society—its history as a term, its evolution, its use within the context of the global South, and its current popularity in the international development world. This presentation was the first work Isabel requested of me, and while the thought of giving it repelled me (I was, after all, a judgmental graduate student steeped in critical development studies and deeply skeptical about “civil society” as a political category), accepting this assignment felt like both a gesture of good faith and my ticket into the EITI process. I agreed to do the presentation and offered to help plan the seminar as well, given that ten days before the event, Isabel had no venue, no agenda, no speakers, and no invitations. In talking more about her expectations for my presentation, Isabel let me know that many of the people I would be speaking to (none of whom I had met at that point) didn’t have very “high qualifications” and would be a diverse group, including parliamentarians, members of voluntary associations, NGO representatives, and beyond. Isabel encouraged me to make liberal use of diagrams so that people would have visual representations of the material, and she reminded me repeatedly that this would be a “capacity-building” program.

The evening after Isabel talked about the incapacities of this civil society group, I worried over pages and pages of fieldnotes. I wrote that I struggled to even imagine who might show up to the meeting, in a country where people were not allowed to gather in groups, and where there was no press separate from government-controlled television or radio. I railed about the performative shortcomings of the civil society category, how it creates another *not yet* (Chakrabarty 2000) for Africa: civil society must be located, developed, their capacity built and organized before they might emerge as some kind of political force. Indeed, this is Mehta’s (1997) argument about the teleological exclusions of liberalism itself, in which, far from a universal
rubric, liberalism proceeds via a specific set of cultural norms, “a constellation of social practices riddled with a hierarchical and exclusionary density.” He goes on to explain:

[These norms] draw on and encourage conceptions of human beings that are far from abstract and universal and in which the anthropological minimum is buried under a thick set of social inscriptions and signals. They chart a terrain full of social credentials. It is a terrain that the natural individual equipped with universal capacities must negotiate before these capacities can assume the form necessary for political inclusion. In this, they circumscribe and order the particular form that the universalistic foundations of Lockean liberalism assume. It is a form that can and historically has left an exclusionary imprint in the concrete instantiation of liberal practices. (70)

The people to whom I would present, according to Isabel, who was of course addressing me and perhaps tailoring her descriptions accordingly, were not yet suitable as civil society, but had to achieve certain social credentials before their ostensibly universal capacities could “assume the form necessary for political inclusion.” Both Barry (2013) and Hetherington (2011) note this kind of interpellation or subject-making capacity of transparency processes, in which novel forms of civil society or publics are made by projects like eiti and do not predate them in any neat way. “It is common to assume,” Barry (2013) writes, “that the public has an immanent existence, waiting to be addressed and activated, only constrained by the absence of appropriate liberal democratic safeguards” (97). But transparency in practice shows that the assembly of publics is itself a disputed process, and that was certainly the case in Equatorial Guinea.

At our next meeting, I asked Isabel for more detail on who was to make up this civil society group, and she passed me a set of World Bank guidelines on how to select civil society for the eiti process, noting that the Ministry of the Interior would make sure the World Bank guidelines were respected and could be reconciled with government definitions. The World Bank criteria stated that (1) civil society participants must be officially registered with the state; (2) they must be compliant with government regulations; and (3) no one should be excluded. Now, clearly, the first and second criteria are completely contradictory to the third, because certainly not everyone who might be considered civil society is officially registered with the state or compliant with government regulations, so all those people are automatically excluded. Moreover, in Equatorial Guinea, the process to become an officially recog-
nized “civil society” group is arduous; and most applicants are rejected on the explicitly vague, but implicitly obvious, grounds that they are somehow threatening to the dictatorship. The process is “long and full of obstacles,” as Okenve (2017) summarizes:

It requires the organisation’s promoters to submit to the Ministry of the Interior an affidavit certifying that it will submit to its control on a quarterly basis, plus a favourable report from the Ministry of the area in which the organisation wishes to work, and another report from the governor or provincial government delegate. It also requires [the organization] to formalise the constitution of the entity before a notary public, who in turn must obtain an authorisation from the Ministry of the Interior to validate this act. No legally constituted association is allowed to receive any donation, whether local or foreign, private or public, above US$100 without prior authorisation from the Interior Minister [and] no legally constituted organisation, that is, no organisation that has been allowed by the government to function, can deal directly with a beneficiary community without an additional authorisation or credential; this is not what the law says, but it is “customary.”

During my time in Equatorial Guinea, a friend was going through this process to get permission to start an association that would show films (there was no movie theater in the country at that point), hold conferences, host speakers, and plan art exhibitions. Her application was rejected, implicitly because the idea was too subversive. So who, then, was to count as Equatoguinean civil society for the purposes of eiti? Who among the as-yet undefined, incapacitated, not-yet of Guinean civil society would be the right ones to participate in this effort? Isabel told me that she would sit down with people from the Ministry of the Interior and the World Bank technical expert, and together they would identify shared guidelines on which groups might participate.

This meeting to-be among the national eiti coordinator, the Minister of the Interior, the World Bank technical expert, and unknown others to define civil society for the purposes of eiti can easily seem like a conspiracy at the highest levels of power to ensure an innocuous “participatory” process. And yet, despite intentions to the contrary, this meeting and others like it never happened. The ingredients for the conspiracy were there, but the willful, organized, strategic, planned, and plotted execution was not. This is not to say that the same outcomes—exclusion, depoliticization, the general defanging of eiti—are not possible in the absence of tactical and deliberate conspiracy,
but the processes, methods, and intentions via which those outcomes are reached are not nearly as organized or intentional as it may be convenient (for analytical and critical purposes) to think, even in an internationally notorious dictatorship. In fact, over the year that I participated in nearly every detail of the eiti process, there was no enforcement of either the government’s or the World Bank’s rules of inclusion/exclusion in defining civil society for the purpose of eiti participation. At each meeting, there were new civil society participants who had not participated in previous meetings, and no one checked if they were registered officially as civil society or not. It seemed enforcement would only come into effect if someone stepped dramatically out of line.

The larger planning process of the first civil society meeting had similar contours. When viewed from the outside, it had all the makings of a depoliticizing conspiracy; from the inside, however, it was a bewildering tour through the daily life of a large bureaucracy. Originally to be held on November 9 and 10, the meeting went through an almost farcical series of postponements and shape-shifts, which again, from the outside, could easily be attributed to an intentional, conspiratorial effort on the part of the government to confuse, exclude, and nearly guarantee the failure of the meeting and hence civil society’s participation in the process. But, having witnessed the postponements and shape-shifts quite literally alongside the organizer herself, I know that they were, in fact—while admittedly staggering in their regularity—a series of logistical conflicts and timing issues. Isabel made it clear to me that by the end of October (nine days ahead of the scheduled meeting), she still did not have the appropriate signatures from her superiors to approve the meeting, and technically we could not go ahead with publicity, invitations (to take place over the radio), or planning without that permission.

In the meantime, the Major Corporation had taken the lead in planning this meeting by arranging to host it on their compound and flying in an Azerbaijani expert on civil society participation in eiti, now working for them out of Houston. In the months leading up to the meeting, and before my involvement, Major representatives told Isabel that they had experience with civil society participation and with the eiti process, and that they were happy to host. Although, as noted above, eiti differentiates itself from other multilateral programs by being a government-led process, where possible, the Equatoguinean government deferred that responsibility to US-based companies. Isabel recounted a meeting to me between a minister and a company representative in which, having been given the files on the eiti effort, the minister turned to the company representative and asked, “So, what
do we have to do?” Again here, we see the implicit assumptions on which liberalism and EITI are built—for instance, a clear line between state and company; already-assembled publics—as mere fictions, but productive fictions.

As the last days of October flew by, Isabel was still without official permission to hold the meeting. Nevertheless, Major went ahead with their hosting plans, and Isabel and I began planning as well, although we couldn’t air anything on the radio or even tell anyone that this meeting would be held. I was somewhat incredulous and said repeatedly to Isabel that no one would come to the meeting if they didn’t know about it. She assured me that it’s always like this here, and people would listen to the radio the day before, if need be, and know that they were invited. Then she would call people on their cell phones and let them know again that they were invited. Over the next few days, the planned seminar changed from two days to one, and from a series of speakers to only me on civil society and an oil company representative on What Is EITI and Civil Society’s Role in EITI? Isabel was to present and go through the country work plan. Note, of course, the potential conflict of interest in an oil company not only hosting the seminar, but also delivering the instruction on what EITI is and how Equatoguinean civil society is meant to participate, let alone my own conflicted role in presenting this dreaded civil society talk.

At some point, it became clear to Isabel that she was not getting permission for the meeting because all the ministers were too busy organizing for the upcoming Second National Economic Conference on the mainland, and no minister would be available to open the EITI meeting proceedings on the currently scheduled day because they would all have already left for Bata, where the economic conference was to take place. At that point, only three days before the meeting was scheduled to begin, Isabel postponed and relocated it—now to be held in Bata on the day before the economic conference was set to begin. Radio announcements in Malabo started five days ahead of the rescheduled event, now to be held on the continent, calling registered civil society members. Radio announcements started in Bata seven days ahead of the rescheduled event.

I flew into Bata the night before the rescheduled meeting (and two days before the Second National Economic Conference I chronicled in chapter 5), arriving at 10:30 p.m. I had been working for the previous four days on my civil society presentation—three days writing in English, and then one day translating into Spanish and editing with the help of the same friend whose film club was deemed too subversive to be approved as “civil society.” Isabel had not had time to look at the developing presentation earlier, so when I ar-

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rived in Bata late that night, she called me into a government office (where she was still working at 11:00 p.m.) to have a look.

Isabel read the document in a speed-reading, out-loud voice and made a series of changes to take out any reference to the potential political (let alone revolutionary) dimensions of civil society. In a sentence on de Tocqueville, she crossed out “The independent associational life of civil society can act as protection against the domination of society by the state.” She revised a sentence about the way in which dissident intellectuals fighting totalitarianism in Eastern and Central Europe in the 1970s and 1980s used the concept of civil society to read: “The concept of civil society has influenced civic participation in Eastern European populations and has played a primordial role in the changes in that region during the 1990s.” But by far the most excruciating change she made, in an already excruciating document, was an edit to a section in which I discussed the role of civil society in South Africa during the antiapartheid struggle. She deleted a sentence in which I had written that civil society “organized strikes and boycotts, and were not simple protesters but approached a revolutionary force against the apartheid regime.” I knew why she edited the previous examples above—Equatorial Guinea is a dictatorship, and those participating in EITI would not be allowed to “politicize” this process—so I said nothing when she made those changes. But in the case of the South African sentence, I asked her, “Why do I have to cut this?” Her response was that “the rich will never say anything bad against the rich.” It shocked me that what she viewed as the Equatoguinean government’s class position aligned them more closely with the former white South African regime than with those mostly Black South Africans who fought against it.

I was awake until 3:30 the next morning making these changes in a dizzying exhaustion crowded with anxiety about complicity, depoliticization, and methodology.

I arrived early to the opulent conference hall where the meeting was to take place, eager to make sure my PowerPoint presentation worked and to calm my under-slept, over-caffeinated nerves. Major Corporation personnel were there as well, checking the technology they provided for the event, including a laptop for all presenters, a projector, and simultaneous translation technology. (Most of them did not speak Spanish.) Two hours after the indicated start time of 9:00 a.m., some members of civil society had trickled in, but the local coordinators and functionaries, with the exception of Isabel, were nowhere to be found. Isabel was in constant contact with the relevant government personnel via text, and she explained to me that if not enough people showed up for the meeting, they wouldn’t come (following

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a widely accepted practice among highly ranked government personnel to only attend functions deemed important enough for their presence). Finally, at 11:30 a.m., Isabel relayed a message from the prime minister, who would have been the functionary to officially open the conference. He felt, she said, that the meeting was so important that he wanted a quorum of civil society people present. Thus, in his name, Isabel postponed the meeting again, now to be held on November 15, the day following the national conference. The Major personnel immediately began muttering to themselves, and the Azerbaijani expert was clearly upset, having already postponed her trip once and now not at all sure she’d be able to attend the meeting a week hence.

While announcing the postponement, Isabel explained EITI in very general terms for those civil society members who were present, and she let them know what they could expect of the upcoming meeting. She then asked for questions. The first and only question came from his Excellency the Representative of Muslims in Equatorial Guinea, who wanted all civil society members present to be formally introduced. In a paranoid dictatorship, especially around a de/politicized political process, participants always wanted to know who was present to avoid a situation analogous to my own disastrous evening with Elena and “the entrepreneur” who was also a security agent. After the group of roughly ten people introduced themselves, Isabel invited everyone to breakfast, and as we settled ourselves around the table in the restaurant, an animated discussion started among them about civil society and Equatorial Guinea in general. “How big is our population?” someone asked, making the point that even basic statistics were impossible to come by. Another demanded basic statistics on oil revenue. Isabel replied that this information was available and that it was the obligation of civil society to find it. The man responded that he’s sick of obligations and that he wants rights; he has a right to information. Another added, elliptically, that “everyone has the right to dream in their country.” He had heard of someone who wanted to start a car factory, he explained. It wouldn’t work, “but let him dream.” Food came, and the conversation slowed but continued. A clearly outspoken member of the group, whom I would later come to know well, explained that people “are sick of the same shit, participating in something that they know will go nowhere, or they know exactly where it will go.” As the conversation about demands and rights continued, I was increasingly mortified about the civil society presentation I had narrowly escaped that day, but for which I was still on the hook in a week’s time. Far from a group of not-yet capacitated potential liberal subjects, the people I was sitting among were a diverse group of Equatoguineans who were generally suspicious of one another, and rightly
suspicious not only of the eiti process, but also of the US corporations who seemed to be behind it, as well as their own government, and yet I couldn’t address any of that openly in the presentation I still had to give.

One week later, after the National Economic Conference had passed, and after more statistical information (of questionable origin) about Equatorial Guinea had been released into the public than perhaps ever before, we all reassembled in the opulent conference hall. Three ministers strode in to open the meeting, and we stood as the prime minister called the meeting to order, flanked by the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Planning. The prime minister’s opening speech that day was an almost verbatim enactment of Hetherington’s account of the politics of transparency (2011), in which “democracy [is] formally similar to capitalism—a rule-based playing field on which the rational choices of citizen-consumers equipped with transparent information were to discover and elect optimal governments” (4), while also optimizing markets. In the wake of the National Economic Conference (which most of us in the room had attended), the prime minister explained that the eiti process represented “the first time that civil society will involve itself in important economic efforts at the national level,” and that this must be understood “in the context of calling the population to participate in the larger economic plan presented at the conference.” He said that eiti represented a restructuring of the relationship between state and society, with society now as the protagonist: “el pueblo en acción,” or the people in action. He explained the importance of administrative transparency to this restructuring, which would lead to authentic participation, effective information, and access to administrative documentation “so that the world of petroleum won’t be secret.” The prime minister finished his speech by invoking the uneven geographies of globalization, noting that “competition is what Equatorial Guinea needs to occupy the center of globalization, not the periphery. For those on the periphery, globalization offers more threats than benefits. What we’re doing now is to move to the center from the periphery. Civil society is central in this move.” Meeting attendees—who represented an assorted crew of political parties, rural community initiatives, youth organizations, an organization of people with disabilities, and a representative from the National Association of Musicians of Equatorial Guinea—applauded politely, at which point the prime minister introduced Susan, the corporate social responsibility representative for the Major Corporation, by saying, “You all know Major, those that handle our petroleum, and sometimes give us something for it.”
On the agenda, Susan (representing the Major Corporation more broadly) was slated to introduce EITI—what it is, why it is important, and what civil society’s role would be therein. She started her presentation with a description of the resource curse, which, she explained, emanated from a lack of transparency regarding the payment of oil revenues. Conveniently for Susan and her corporation, she specified that EITI was a process in which citizens hold their governments accountable for spending from oil and mining. The corporation disappeared from her description. After explaining what the EITI process was specifically designed to do—identify a third-party aggregator familiar with oil finance and Equatoguinean contractual regimes who will collect revenue reporting from the government and payment information from companies, and then reconcile them—Susan received an amazing series of questions from the civil society members in attendance. Below, I translate and transcribe several of them, interspersed with brief, parenthetical clarifying commentary of my own. Each question was asked by a separate enquirer, and Susan answered all of them, unless I note otherwise.

Roughly half the questions to Susan addressed Major’s role in recent Equatoguinean history, notably, the company’s complicity with the government and their role in corruption. (It is important to remember that among all the major US-based companies in Equatorial Guinea, Major had been there the longest.) Some of these questions also brought in the complicity of multilateral partners—the World Bank and the IMF. Read together, I interpret these questions less as a defense of the Equatoguinean state than as a polyvocal indictment of the companies in the wake of Susan’s presentation, which absolved them completely and pointed all the blame at the government. Note that Susan’s answer to nearly every question was that the question’s content was not relevant to the specific (political microscopy) of the EITI process.

Q  About the curse (la maldición, referring to the role of the resource curse in her presentation): Your company has been here for many years, and 90 percent of local people don’t have access to work for you. If we want to work for you, we have to pay an agency. Most people can’t pay this. Guineanos should be able to have access to work for the companies. The people just see oil platforms and don’t know anything about the businesses. Maybe you can talk to the government or the companies about these problems.

A  I will answer this question at lunch. I want to keep these questions about the process of EITI. But to answer quickly, some people sit for an entrance exam,
and if they pass, Major hires them. There are no third parties in that process. We do hire people through subcontractors, and they comply with eg laws. (Note that the entrance exam process is just for higher levels of work. This isn’t true for maids or drivers, for example, who are hired through Voxa or other subcontracting agencies, as discussed in chapter 4.)

Q Your people live in beautiful estates and we have no access to them. Why is that?

A This too is not a part of eiti. But we do have outreach in communities. But the eiti process is intended to give you access. In other words, it’s a way in.

Q Can you give us a better definition of how we should define “corruption”? Only economic? Political as well? And good governance: to whom does this refer? To your companies and your leadership, or to our state?

A In eiti, “corruption” refers to misuse of government revenues. (Note that this is factually untrue in eiti’s own terms, which specify the relationship between company payments and government receipt of those payment. How the government chooses to use those revenues is beyond the primary scope of the auditing process, as explained above.)

Q The businesses have now been in our country for a while, and they don’t have trade unions. When will they have trade unions? (Everyone laughs.)

A This is not a question I can answer. It’s beyond the scope of eiti. (Isabel joins in to say that unionization is up to the workers. As far as she knows, “unions are legal here.” They are not, as discussed in chapter 4.)

Q If I buy a car for 20,000 CFA but the receipt says 15,000 (in other words, if the receipt is falsified), how can civil society moderate in this process where everyone is taking their little bit and putting in false receipts? Where will we get our information from?

A The aggregator: PricewaterhouseCoopers, Ernst & Young, someone who is completely objective. Everyone takes part in selecting the aggregator. It will be someone that everyone trusts and that everyone agrees is objective.

Q We have heard that the World Bank, the IMF, and others are partners in this effort. In the economic chaos of 1995, the government followed IMF suggestions to fire two thousand people from public administration. But now that we have money, can’t EITI help, give advice, tell them to hire these people back? We can’t get rid of poverty if people don’t have jobs. (Everyone applauds.)
This is not what EITI does. The World Bank and IMF continue to give advice, but not EITI.

Isabel speaks up again to say that the advice of the structural adjustment era is not relevant to this time. Now, she says, we’re looking at diversifying the economy; the IMF and World Bank were at the conference, and this will make jobs.

There was another series of questions about civil society itself. Some participants openly or tacitly agreed with the capacity-building framework, and they actively requested their own tutelage to “become” civil society members that might be capable of understanding the accounting complexities at issue. Others noted the historic difficulties of civil society groups in Equatorial Guinea and wondered pointedly how this process would (or would not) change that history.

For civil society to commit to this process, we still need more training, more details. The concepts are new to most of us. I would like to request more seminars.

Please speak up when you need more information. Again, remember that EITI is not an event, but the beginning of a process.

If we don’t know who we are as civil society, how will we know what to do with the information we are given? We don’t know what to do with the information.

(Isabel responded directly to say that the civil society groups will be given more education on finance, payments, and other aspects of the program to enable them to follow the process.)

The European Union (in Equatorial Guinea) did a study on the difficulties of civil society in the country. That study concluded that civil society was not organized; that the actors who should participate don’t have training; and that there was a lack of economic resources to support civil society. These problems persist. The EU has tried to put together an overview organization of civil society, but they couldn’t get it ratified. Now EITI is requesting our participation, but we haven’t resolved the original issue.

Equatorial Guinea is in a difficult situation. But perhaps we can use this opportunity to build capacity, to solve some of the problems.

We can see in this question-and-answer session what Ballestero (2012), Hetherington (2011), and Barry (2013) found in their respective ethnographic
accounts of transparency processes. The **EITI** process was making entities *speakable*—labor unions, corporate and government collusion, the question of local employment, critiques of international financial institutions—that were *not speakable* before the process began, or certainly not in a more or less public forum like this one. We see evidence of both Barry’s “new forms of dispute” (2013, 5) and Hetherington’s argument that “the practices of representation that go into creating transparency are saturated at every turn with precisely that aspect of social life that they are meant to get rid of: politics” (2011, 7). In other words, the ostensible delimitation of the **EITI** process was, in fact, creating new kinds of space for political speech in front of high-level oil company and government functionaries, not to mention fellow Equatoguineans relatively unknown to one another. And the substantive content of this political speech was nowhere near accounting. Indeed, for the most part, the questions weren’t even near oil-as-money, but much closer to the material in this book’s preceding chapters on the conditions of possibility for oil-as-money in the first place—luxurious enclaves for foreign management, lack of local employment, contracting and subcontracting regimes, trade unions and their absence, and the difficulties of finding any kind of information in Equatorial Guinea. And this question content persisted despite Susan’s repeated protestations that these questions “weren’t relevant to **EITI**.” The one question that notionally addressed accounting—about how falsified receipts can possibly be accurately accounted for—was, of course, a jab at the companies and the Equatoguinean state alike, believed by most people to be equally complicit in falsifying financial information; thus, a process to look at already-falsified receipts (i.e., the **EITI** process) would go nowhere.

While the **EITI** process undeniably opened up new spaces for political speech, these spaces remained within a persistent subtext of paranoia, mutual suspicion, and hesitation to participate, meaningfully shared by all but one civil society participant—already a well-known and often-arrested member of an opposition party—whom I will call Sonrisa. This mutual suspicion was evident at the first canceled meeting, when the representative for Muslim groups asked everyone to introduce themselves. It was even more evident when—after long hours that included my ultimately uneventful presentation, during which people just nodded politely at the weird white woman, and Isabel’s discussion of the action plan for civil society that they were all asked to sign—the **EITI** meeting concluded with a long a discussion of *who would count as civil society* for the purposes of **EITI**.

Isabel introduced the day’s final discussion topic by explaining that “all who are here now will be participants. Everyone who is here will be called
for every event. But when there are national committee meetings, only the selected committee will be able to participate.” With that, she posed a question to the group: “Who do you think should make up that selected committee? Given the complicated level of discourse around EITI, who should do it?” The answer she was fishing for, and the answer she was given, was that the selected committee should have education and relevant work experience, which ruled out roughly four-fifths of the people present. Nevertheless, Isabel asked those present to discuss the membership of the fifteen-member national committee and initiated that discussion by reading aloud Government Decree 42/2007, which regulated the participation of civil society in EITI. After reading the Decree, Isabel explained, “This law has a trap (or a trick) [la ley tiene trampa]. It says that five of the fifteen members should be from PDGE [the ruling party]. Over time, we should work to improve this law.”

Isabel’s statement—inventing the assembled members of civil society to discuss the content of a law, and not just any content, but content that specified a clear over-representation of the ruling party (which Isabel represented to many people present)—was, plainly, a radical one. Assembled members of civil society were incredulous. One representative asked, “Why did we have all that discussion before if there’s already a law!?” Others chimed in to the same effect, stating unequivocally that the law cannot be changed because it’s been published officially already. But Isabel insisted to everyone that we could interpret the document. She explained that the government legislated under time pressure from an external EITI deadline, but the law does not necessarily reflect the needs of the EITI process. She proposed that the assembled group make a recommendation to the government of what would work best for EITI, and went on to suggest: “For instance, on the issue of political parties, perhaps one representative should be from PDGE and another from the opposition.” She said that a recommendation of this kind wouldn’t mean that we were disrespecting the document (metonymically, the government), but that we were involved in finding the best application of Equatoguinean law to the EITI process. Having known and worked intensively with Isabel for a month at this point, I believe her request for the assembled people to suggest a change in the law was genuine. It was not mere bait to sniff out dissent, as some people present clearly feared.

As Isabel insisted on the pliability of this law and the opportunity meeting participants had to change it for the better, civil society members interrupted her repeatedly to insist that they couldn’t change the decree, with a clear subtext of fear of government reprisal. And yet, Isabel herself was a government functionary telling them they could. To me, in that moment,
this debate seemed like such an important chance to potentially transcend the political microscopy of the EITI process through actually debating and improving an existing law. I found myself increasingly incensed and impassioned with each interruption of Isabel’s insistence. I wanted to interject, and I drafted the following in Spanish in my notebook: “Let me see if I can explain myself. Ms. Isabel, as the national coordinator of EITI and as a member of the public administration, is giving you, as civil society, an incredible opportunity to participate in the best implementation of this decree and to deepen your participation in the EITI process. But it seems no one is willing or interested. Shouldn’t we take this opportunity?” But I didn’t get a chance to say anything. It was 5:30 p.m., and we had been working since eight o’clock that morning without food, having taken only one thirty-minute break. Isabel brought the meeting to a close, and afterward, I stood with Susan and her Equatoguinean translator, to whom I voiced my incredulity about what had just happened. Susan replied: “There’s no real debate. EITI is only to decide the amount of money that the government gets. Civil society will have input into who is the aggregator, but the aggregator is chosen by a bid process. So, it’s just for civil society to go and approve.” While Susan’s response was textbook transparency-as-depoliticization, having been in Equatorial Guinea on and off for a decade at that point, she continued: “That said, if you had told me ten years ago that people would be in a group debating a decree, saying it’s not valid, in a government building, I would never have believed you. I can’t believe how much things have changed.” In Susan’s brief recap, we see both the radically depoliticizing potential of transparency processes—“there’s no real debate”—and the out-of-bounds political potentials these processes create, in which a group (hesitates to) debate a decree in a government building.

With both of these truths held in tension in my own experience of the meeting, I returned to my friend Josefina’s family home in Bata, where I’d been staying. I told her about the meeting: how the people had an amazing opportunity and they didn’t take it, and how I thought it was because they didn’t understand what was actually being offered to them, or maybe because they were scared. Isabel herself said it was because people still thought they were living under a dictatorship. But Josefina disagreed. She said they did understand, but that no one wanted to be perceived as being in the opposition. “People always feel like people will talk [as in, inform], so even if inside they wanted to say something, they won’t because of others. That’s why security works so well in this country, because the masses talk just to fuck over others. Not even because they get paid or receive anything in return.”
Over the next three months, there was a series of EITI meetings with various combinations of the stakeholder groups—civil society, foreign and national oil companies, and the Equatoguinean government. In this section, I offer a sequence of brief vignettes and descriptions of these meetings, in part to give a sense of the arc of the EITI process over the year I participated. I also offer these accounts to show how that process was perhaps not an arc at all, but tenuously connected fits and starts of processes, conversations, and priorities that stretched not only between Houston-based companies and the Equatoguinean government with whom they had signed lucrative contracts, but also into the worlds of transnational development work and nonprofit organizations.

Shortly after the meeting chronicled above, Isabel traveled to Oslo, Norway, where the EITI International Secretariat was holding its annual meeting. She was greeted in Oslo with the news that Sonrisa—who, as an active member of an opposition party, had fairly extensive contacts in the international NGO world—had submitted a complaint letter to Publish What You Pay (an NGO affiliated with EITI) about the November meeting chronicled above. In the letter, Sonrisa wrote that the notice civil society members were given before the meeting was too short; those who eventually showed up to the meeting were not sufficiently independent from the government; and he had signed the civil society action plan under pressure. Publish What You Pay representatives confronted Isabel when she arrived in Oslo, Sonrisa’s letter in hand, and requested a meeting with her, which she refused, after which she was asked to meet with “some other expert” who told her that the process in Equatorial Guinea “is not transparent enough.” Recounting this humiliating experience to me first over the phone from Oslo and later upon her return, Isabel said that she had tried to explain to the foreign “experts” and NGO representatives in Oslo that in Equatorial Guinea, the short notice was sufficient; none of the NGOs were explicitly affiliated with the government; and civil society members were in no way pressured to sign the action plan. She was then told that there needed to be another meeting and that Peter Eigen (at that time the head of EITI’s International Secretariat) should come. She questioned this assertion both in her Oslo interactions and again to me: “So it will be taken more seriously if he does it!? It always feels like people don’t trust the government here. But in the [EITI] Sourcebook it says this is a government-driven process! All I had was three days of fighting in...
Oslo. They don’t want to listen to what the government says. They think that they are right and the government is wrong.”

In response to her experience in Oslo (in mid-December), Isabel called a civil society meeting after the winter holidays, in late January. She began that meeting by stating that when she got to Oslo, she was greeted with the accusation that the government forces NGOs to agree to things against their will. Everyone at the table shook their heads, and I found myself in the odd position of nearly agreeing with them. Having participated in every twist and turn of the November planning meeting, and of course the meeting itself, I knew full well that no one was forced to do anything. I wrote in my notebook, “It’s good that Sonrisa hears this and understands the consequences of his actions, but then of course it may turn others [in the civil society group] against him.” Isabel told assembled civil society members that they needed to call their own meeting, ideally by February 4, so that they could participate meaningfully, and on their own terms, in the meeting with companies and the government scheduled for February 5. She said that they, as civil society, had to get the announcement on the radio, and that they would be responsible for letting everyone know with sufficient lead time. “And there will be international people here as observers on the fifth, so maybe then they’ll believe our efforts.” Sonrisa, knowing that all of this was in response to his letter, said he wanted to help call the meeting on February 4, but couldn’t do it himself. He requested administrative support from Isabel who responded, not without sarcasm, that if the government (read: her) organizes and announces the meeting on the fourth, then maybe civil society will feel that they can’t speak openly. Sonrisa responded, “Don’t tell me a black pen is a blue pen! I can’t go to the Ministry of the Interior and ask for an NGO list! It’s just not that easy. We need your coordination office to facilitate this.” Isabel responded, “Go with a copy of the decrees, go with the acts to the Minister of the Interior. We can’t try to change the functioning of the whole administration; we are just working in EITI.”

And this, of course, was a central problem with the EITI process in Equatorial Guinea, in general. How do you do it in a dictatorship with no independent press? How do you do it where civil society is essentially illegal? How do you do it between the demands for liberalism from Publish What You Pay and the exigencies of what would actually happen if Sonrisa were to go to the Ministry of the Interior, or try by himself to get an announcement put on the radio? How do you do it between histories of violence and repression that pester, even as recently returned government functionaries like Isabel promise (and seem to genuinely believe) that something else is
possible? Having become friends at that point, Sonrisa and I conferred after that meeting and agreed to work with whomever else was willing to organize an independent meeting. I would serve as the institutional go-between, using my relationship with Isabel to request needed information.

Also in late January, Isabel called a meeting for the corporate and government EITI stakeholders. Held in the Major compound, this meeting brought together country managers of all the major US-based companies (Major, Smith, Endurance), along with Regal Energy, two Chinese-owned oil companies, some smaller US-based exploration companies and representatives from both Sonagas and GEPetrol—the national gas and oil companies—as well as high-level government representatives from the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Mines. The preoccupations at this meeting were remarkably different from those expressed at the civil society meeting. After presentations by Susan and Isabel on the EITI process, nearly the whole meeting was taken up with accounting; again, however, not accounting in a narrow, depoliticized sense, but in a tense, accounting-as-politics and as information-potentially-full-of-liability sense. After the initial bland presentations on the EITI process, a representative from the Ministry of Finance asked, “Which are the different concepts of revenue that we want the aggregator to look at? What will oil companies share? We will share the same.” The country manager for the Major Corporation responded: “We will report lease bonus payments, lease rental payments, any sale of hydrocarbon that created revenue, any take in kind provided to government or another company. For example, GEPetrol is lifting half of our crude. GEPetrol would have to report that they received that and sold it. It’s that level of definition: product sales and takes in kind, plus other major fees paid to governments for our contracts: royalties, taxes. The government will have to take a view [then he interrupted himself], well, I would recommend that they take a view that we won’t take small registration fees: port fees, etc.”

We can see from this exchange that what actually counted as revenue for the sake of the EITI process was not self-evident. Clearly, from the country manager’s description, “revenue” in the world of oil and gas contracts is a radically disaggregated and distributed category. We are not simply talking about double-entry bookkeeping here. Note, however, that at least at this point in the process, the government and the companies seem happy to work together on what will count as revenue, with the government representative effectively asking the oil companies, “What should count as revenue? Whatever you decide, that’s what we’ll report as well.” In this question of what counts, or what will and will not be counted in an accounting process, the
various complicities between companies and the government grow starker, including the question of confidentiality. The Major country manager again: “Here’s what we should do, what I think we should do.” (He constantly corrected himself from a command voice to a suggestion voice.) “We have to maintain the confidentiality of our production sharing contracts through this process. We should try to have a model confidentiality agreement where we could all sign the same thing. We need to bind the aggregator to this agreement also, bind him [sic] individually back to the companies and the government. Fully back and forth confidentiality provision.” This preoccupation with confidentiality brings us back to the exploitative production sharing contract terms I discussed in chapter 3. Here, Major’s country manager is worried that public disclosures of payments and revenue through the EITI process could inadvertently disclose the specificities of contract terms. Royalties, taxation rates, take-in-kind, profit sharing percentages—all of these are not merely revenue categories but negotiated political relationships. And Major, as the company with the oldest standing contracts in Equatorial Guinea, undoubtedly had exceptionally lucrative (for the company) / exploitative (for the government) contract terms that they did not want revealed either to other companies or to a more general public. Here again, a process focused narrowly on accounting aims at political microscopy but splatters over a wide swath of political relationships in practice.

The final preoccupation at this more-than-accounting meeting was a question at the intersection of audit, aggregation, and temporality. Having made our way slowly through discussions of what would count as revenue and how confidentiality would be maintained, the question of revenue from when arose. How many years back does the EITI process need to go? How current does it need to be? Isabel suggested that at least for Equatorial Guinea’s first foray into the process, they report perhaps one to two years of payments and revenue. But which one to two years was a surprisingly thorny problem. The country manager of the Regal Corporation explained the temporality conundrum as follows: “The information we share as a company will come from audited financial reports. This means that we will be publishing with years of delay. Does that meet [the EITI] Secretariat requirements? If information can only be submitted following an audit process, then we won’t have the data until a year later—after our internal auditing process.” Major’s country manager picked up the thread: “We are subject to an internal audit as a company. I have audited books. When I report [to EITI], I report what we have. It’s just that as a business my books do get audited by an outside entity because I’m a public company and I have to do that. My
The auditor doesn’t close out my books until early the following year. If we’re in ’08, we could submit ’05 and ’06.”

As these two country managers went back and forth with one another, there was a clear subtext about the Equatoguinean government’s bookkeeping. After all, nearly everyone in that room had just been through the National Economic Conference together and knew full well the admitted shortcomings of the government’s bookkeeping practices. Isabel finally addressed the palpable tension, now in her capacity as technician in the Ministry of Finance and Budgets: “The government doesn’t have formal auditing as such. We have a yearly IMF mission [Article IV] that has a look in our accounts. So, the government will submit IMF-reviewed data as our audited data.” In this meeting, we can see that even where political microscopy and ostensibly depoliticized accounting are the goals, and where participants are addressing EITI on its own terms, those terms are deeply politicized and controversial. They are saturated with potential liability for companies and governments alike. Thus, Shore and Wright’s (2015, 421) anxiety that transparency programs “recast political programs as mundane administrative and technical matters to be dealt with by experts, thereby masking their ideological content and removing them from the realm of contestable politics” may be misplaced, certainly in the case of Equatorial Guinea. Seemingly mundane administrative questions—What counts as revenue? What can we keep confidential?—asked by and among experts who are both in competition and collusion with one another, do not mask ideological content, but beckon it. Force it to be spoken. Certainly, in the case of EITI in Equatorial Guinea, if the companies and the government would collude successfully, then this removal from the realm of contestable politics would be achieved; but this would happen only through great effort that included wading through imperial debris and confidentiality tensions in shareholder-owned companies, all of which shape the deep politics of accounting itself.

Less than a week later, on February 4, Sonrisa and I spent the entire day in an NGO office in Caracolas, drafting a proposal from civil society to the National Coordinator (Isabel) that outlined adequate civil society participation in the EITI process. Sonrisa had made cell phone calls to other civil society members (on a prepaid card provided by the government), and we were joined for a time by two of the more senior members of the civil society group, in addition to two foreign experts who had flown in for the next day’s meeting. One of these foreign experts was an Italian man I will call Piero, who was working in Cameroon as the regional director of Publish What You Pay, and one was a Venezuelan man—Luis—who was also an EITI board.
member. I had picked them up from the airport the evening before, and Luis marveled at the good quality of the roads driving from the airport, illustrative, in my experience, of people’s apocalyptic imaginations of Equatorial Guinea, so often contravened by lived experience. Piero had had visa problems because the government didn’t send him a letter of invitation in time, and he paid 30,000 CFA in the airport (roughly US$50) as an entry fee. After paying, Piero asked me loudly in the airport if this was corruption, and if so, stated that this was the first time in his ten years in Africa that he had paid a bribe. (I personally thought that 30,000 CFA was a reasonable, if unposted, fee for letting a foreign national in without a visa.) As I drove them from the airport to their hotel, they asked me what I did, and among other things I mentioned my research and relationships with the migrant wives of oil company managers. Piero made the analogy to Italian mafia wives—taking care of kids and having potlucks while their husbands decide whose leg to cut off. It was in this interesting company that Sonrisa and I drafted the proposal that he would present at the first meeting among all three stakeholder groups, to be held the following day.

That meeting felt both momentous and uneventful. It was perhaps the first time that civil society—by which I mean, essentially, regular Equatoguineans—high-level government personnel, and high-level oil company personnel were all in one small room together, with the idea that they should address one another. So that seemed momentous, as did the ten minutes during which Sonrisa read aloud the proposal we had drafted the day before. But in other ways, the meeting was quotidian and felt purposeless. Oil company people don’t speak Spanish, and there wasn’t simultaneous translation, so many sat there with their arms folded across their chests as the Minister of Mines opened the meeting or as Sonrisa presented the proposal; so too when it was the companies’ turn to speak, and one of the Equatoguinean ministers was visibly asleep at the head of the table. But two short weeks later, with the blessing of the foreign visitors who came to witness the process, the International Committee of EITI met in Accra, Ghana, and Equatorial Guinea was officially recognized as a candidate country. This recognition gave them two years (until February 2010) to complete all EITI requirements and to move from a candidate country to a compliant country.

After this flurry of meetings in early 2008, clearly scheduled to meet the Accra deadline, we didn’t have another EITI meeting until June, this time on the occasion of the one-month residency of a Peruvian World Bank/EITI consultant I will call Carlos. Carlos did not work for the World Bank, but was subcontracted by them given his central role in the EITI process in Peru.
A Cameroonian expert was also supposed to attend this meeting, but Isabel explained to me that he refused to come because he didn’t get his invitation letter from the Equatoguinean government in time. Subsequently, he didn’t trust Isabel’s advice to just go to Douala and that she would get him into the country. I heard her, exasperated on the phone with him, explaining, “You know how African governments work! If you want to participate in this conference according to European norms, fine. But you are an African and we are an African government, and you have to trust me that this is how this will work.”

In June, at the final official meeting I attended, Carlos gave what was, for Equatorial Guinea, a wildly radical political speech. He began by repeating, indeed hammering, what I have called “the incantation” in this book—the contradiction between so much oil wealth and so much poverty. If the resource curse was the acceptable way to tell this story in Equatorial Guinea, Carlos’s speech offered no such niceties. Rather than relying on the comfortable distance of economic theory, he was directly critical of the Equatoguinean government. I wondered how government representatives in the audience were taking it. Civil society people I had come to know well over the last many months were visibly uncomfortable and squirmed in their chairs. “All Equatoguineans are owners of these [hydrocarbon] resources” Carlos explained “and, organized as civil society, they can fulfill functions that the government should fulfill.”

Again, in Equatorial Guinea, it was difficult if not impossible to say directly, in public, and still less in front of government ministers, that there were things that the government did not do. Most basically, this was because you could not criticize them, and more specifically because even the imagined state was not a service-providing state. It was a patronage state. Services, when provided, were provided through personal connections—enchufes into the system, or kin networks. But Carlos carried on about Sendero Luminoso and the trial of Fujimori for corruption and human rights abuses. Carlos’s speech again highlights the ways in which the EITI process did not stay within the lines of political microscopy, but rather spat up politics in the most unanticipated places. Who knew, for instance, that the World Bank subcontractor would be the most radical show in town?

When Carlos finished and opened the floor for questions, the first to speak was a lower level government functionary, who offered a rhetorical question that was in fact a warning to those considering asking actual questions. He said, in brief, that this EITI meeting was not an opportunity to issue personal political complaints. But rather than use the opportunity of Carlos’s
politicized speech to do that, members of civil society chose to illustrate the chasm between what Carlos narrated of his experience in Peru, and their experiences in Equatorial Guinea:

Q **You talk about your experience in Peru, but I don’t have anywhere near the capacity that you talk about. You say in the Peru case they only invited NGOs [to participate] whose institutional work already had to do with the themes of EITI. EITI was an extension of what they were already doing. If this were to be the case here, obviously there would be no EITI (pointing to the fact that there are no NGOs monitoring government budgets or corruption in Equatorial Guinea).**

Q **I feel like you have given us a very interesting case, and one that is very different from ours. For example, if here only those members of civil society who already worked in transparency or fiscal vigilance were to participate, we wouldn’t have anyone. I want to say that here we find ourselves in a very different situation.**

Rather than mustering a substantive response to these grounded and genuine questions, Carlos was basically empathetically dismissive of Equatoguinean civil society in his exit report for the World Bank and the Equatoguinean government:

> It is not difficult to understand that a large number of representatives of civil society organizations have seen, in this initiative, an opportunity to obtain financial resources to carry out their particular projects. These can range from hospital care to artistic events but have nothing to do with issues of transparency and accountability. No wonder that some have felt themselves “misplaced” when confronted with the real definition of the EITI . . . . They are more concerned about what their participation in the EITI-EG can bring to them, rather than what they can bring to the country through their participation in the Commission.

And indeed, many civil society participants were consistently concerned not only with potential revenue for their resource-starved organizations, but also with the potential of desplacamientos (small payments, similar to per diems) for their personal participation in the process. Just like the practice of a second salary for government ministers, who receive a desplacamiento for agreeing to speak here or participate there, it seemed perfectly reasonable for civil society participants to demand payments for participation, confi-
dent that this was perhaps the only guaranteed good that could come from such a problematic process. Finally, Carlos also reported that although Isabel seemed to be genuinely dedicated to her job and to the EITI process, she was radically overextended, and he suggested that the government name a full-time EITI director. My own role came up in Carlos’s final report as well:

This consultant finds that the person in charge of the National Coordinating Office should have a full-time dedication to her duties. The progress of the EITI process in Equatorial Guinea has been favored by the collaboration of an American anthropologist, Ms. Hannah Appel, who is in Malabo carrying out the field work for her Ph.D. program. Ms. Appel arrived six months ago and in six months she will return to her country; her departure will make clearer the limitations of the Coordination Office to fulfill its responsibilities.

Over my year of participation in the EITI process, during which I grew to be close friends with both Isabel and Sonrisa and gained access to more documents, ministries, and US oil company bureaucracies than I could ever have anticipated, what I saw more than anything was the messiness and unpredictability of the EITI process. Certainly, there is government and corporate collusion, and at the same time there are unanticipated spaces of politicization and resistance. This messiness is precisely what ethnography, especially in recent decades, is accustomed to finding. But what is all this messiness doing? Is it creating interstitial political spaces for dissent and friction? Sure, to an extent. Is the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative a simple stage for the reproduction of the power of transnational liberal political practice? I would say, given the above account, no, to an extent. Not only was the process itself messy and ever-far from EITI’s stated goals, but by February 2010—the date set in the Accra meeting for Equatorial Guinea to demonstrate sufficient progress to move from a candidate to a compliant country—the country was officially delisted from the EITI process. It had failed.

CONCLUSION

Transparency—the ontology in the licit life of capitalism that was supposed to be about politics—failed, on its own terms. I want to note the contrast here with, for example, the offshore, the contract, or the national economy, which despite their own forms of messiness, did not fail, or at least did not in Equatorial Guinea. As I wrote of the offshore, it is not the capitalist utopia of placeless economic interaction. Rather, it is a teeming and situated social
space: men from twenty different countries and seventeen different companies, consequentially divided by nationality and race; Equatoguineans underpaid and held indefinitely at the level of trainee; and a corporate form so multiple and attenuated that, paradoxically, it can seem to disintegrate altogether. But nor is the power of the offshore, or its effects, undone by attention to this teeming and contentious sociality. So too with contracts, which, I contended, render licit blatant forms of neocolonialism; frame multiplicities into legally recognized and politically consequential singularities; and change contested political regimes into petro-powerhouses. We can point to contracts’ reliance on and manipulation of postcolonial inequality and sovereignty without imagining that these “social explanations” or “historical contexts” somehow undo their power. On the contrary, I argued that they are constitutive of it. But transparency, that which was meant to address or redress or hold accountable some of the excesses to be found in these earlier forms, did not work in this same way. As I will argue in the book’s brief afterword, liberalism (here in the form of transparency, civil society participation, and an improved investment climate), especially when mobilized as the moral architecture for resistance to transnational corporations, is too much in the service of capitalism to work as a trenchant form of politics.3

In 2017, a new General Secretary of eiti Equatorial Guinea was named, and the three stakeholder groups—the government, civil society, and the oil and gas companies—began to meet again. Indeed, as of June 2017, roughly a decade after the above year of work, the government’s website reported that “eiti members from Gabon and Equatorial Guinea will receive . . . a training seminar which will allow their Civil Society Organisations to learn the tools and mechanisms for internal handling, and how to carry out fully and effectively their missions within the extractive sector, and boost sustainable governance in this promising strategic sector.”4

As the decades wear on, it seems that Equatoguineans remain candidates for liberalism. Equatorial Guinea is, in fact, a candidate country, in eiti’s language, hoping still to become compliant liberal subjects (again, eiti’s language). And this iterative deferral itself reproduces fertile ground for the licit life of capitalism in Equatorial Guinea.