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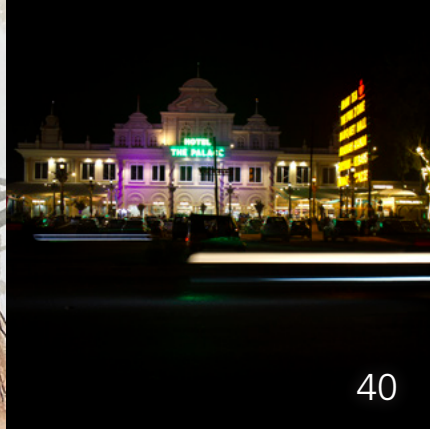




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AN 65.2 explores the anatomy of deception and dissects the truths and untruths that form our understanding of reality. What lies do people tell themselves? What lies do they tell others? Are these depictions conscious or subconscious, harmful or benign, or even helpful in certain contexts? Are they structured as conspiracies, creating alternate versions of reality?

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Image from "Transitory Facades: Architectures of the Middle-Somewhere."

Credit: Seema Krishnakumar

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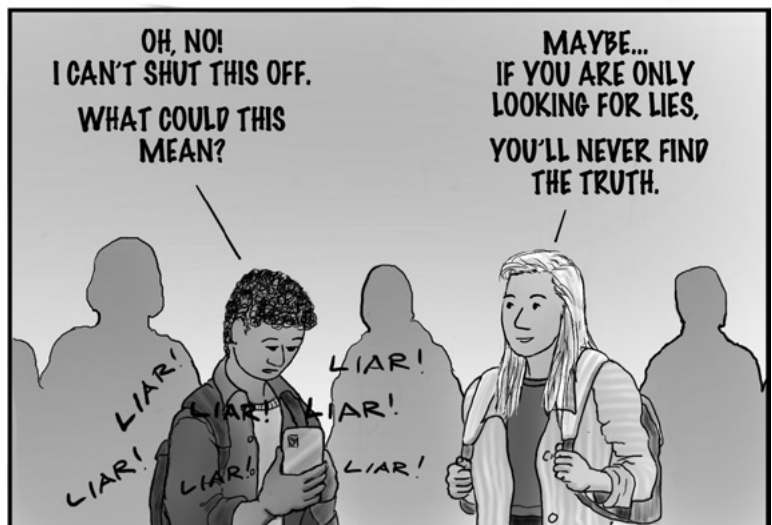
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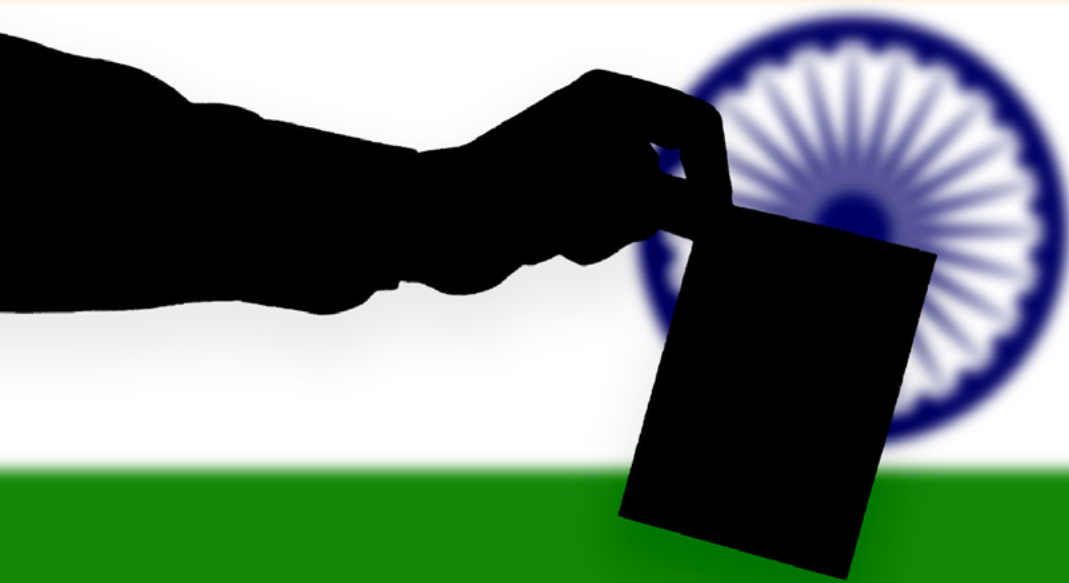
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A Conspiracy of Democratic Repair

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By Nomaan Hasan

As India gears up for national elections in summer 2024, the atmosphere across the country is uncharacteristically flat. There isn't much of the usual suspense or festivity that marks the occasion, since Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) are set to return to power in what observers declare is [“almost an inevitability.”](#) India's democratic health, [according to most indicators](#), has declined precipitously during his tenure. An unprecedented centralization of executive power has been achieved through the effective takeover of traditionally nonpartisan institutions like the judiciary, and a fierce crackdown on independent political spaces has ensured that barely any space exists for opposing views. As the government has weaponized antiterror laws and foreign funding directives to arrest activists and shut down civil society organizations, scholars contend that [no country is a better exemplar of our global democratic recession than India](#).

In what many regard as a mystery, Modi continues to enjoy shockingly high public support despite presiding over democratic backsliding and historic unemployment. Both of his electoral victories have been achieved with record turnouts. The BJP now runs not only the central government but also over two-thirds of the states, making it by far the country's most powerful political party. As one commentator concludes, [“democratic backsliding has begun to enjoy electoral legitimacy.”](#)

How do we understand the public's support for an agenda that seems to conflict with its self-interest? Are the people being deceived into voting for the ruling party, or are they making an informed decision? Of course, the contrast between being deceived and being informed is not a stark binary, but this question arises as dissenting voices ponder how to reconcile the desires of the populace with what they consider to be its tangible interest. Government actions and policies acquire legitimacy through electoral successes, which further marginalizes conflicting views. Any opposition is thus confronted with the daunting contradiction wherein their advocacy can be dismissed as being in conflict with the will of the people. My aim is not to deliver a verdict on the naivete or clear-sightedness of India's populace but to ask why the question of the people's vulnerability to deception acquires significance in the first place. To draw out the stakes motivating this problem and the political implications it carries, I draw on my ethnographic fieldwork and present a scene from the strategy planning meeting of a dissident civil society group.

THE DISCURSIVE ROLE OF DECEPTION

It was a couple of days after the Legislative Assembly elections in the North Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, where the incumbent BJP had won an overwhelming majority in what was for many observers a surprise victory. Home to the largest Muslim population in the country, Uttar Pradesh is considered [India's most politically significant state](#) and a bellwether for the national mood. On this balmy late-winter morning,

How do we understand the public's support for an agenda that seems to conflict with its self-interest? Are the people being deceived into voting for the ruling party, or are they making an informed decision?

I found myself in a dim room in a building under renovation on the outskirts of Lucknow, the state capital. Equipped with plastic chairs and creaking ceiling fans, the venue had for the past few months been serving as the makeshift meeting point for a loose collection of activists and social workers who were seeking to evade state scrutiny. Piercing the glumness, someone sighed while perusing the newspaper, “You can't argue with the results.”

Visibly agitated, other participants protested, calling the verdict a *thopa hua* (imposed) mandate. Among other things, the imposition was referring to the state capture of media, which has resulted in the stifling of dissenting views and the consolidation of a narrative that aligns with the interests of the ruling party. “They have infiltrated into every neighborhood and every phone,” Shivam lamented, summing up the BJP's door-to-door as well as digital outreach, which is constantly mobilized to maintain a conducive ground for ideological dissemination. A key element of this narrative control is the concerted effort to ensure consistency among media outlets in how events are portrayed.

An advocate who provides legal aid to under-trial prisoners, Shivam enumerated a list of incidents from his district wherein Muslim men were arbitrarily apprehended on charges of insulting the Hindu religion, by now a familiar template for a news event in Uttar Pradesh. The accusation was invariably fabricated, but its circulation across the mediascape served to generate

resentment and aggression among large segments of the population. He illustrated, “Pick up any two newspapers and you will find the exact same reportage, switch on your TV and the same framing of the issue will be repeated ad nauseam on every channel, the same hashtag will then trend on Twitter.” With business magnates close to the ruling party establishing control over the free press, even [journalists admit that news outlets now function as the government's propaganda wing.](#)

Shivam continued, “Everywhere you turn, you will see the same misleading issues packaged in the same misleading manner.” The events, designed to amplify sectarian tensions, were orchestrated through a compliant media apparatus, creating a cycle of narratives that reinforces the government's grip on power. In such a scenario, the formal democratic process provides only a veneer of legitimacy, as the underlying reality is one of deception, where the outcome is predetermined through the systematic manipulation of public opinion. The forced mandate that results from such conditions, then, is not a genuine expression of popular will but rather a distortion of democracy. While there is no official suspension of the democratic process, as in a state of emergency, many liken the situation to an [internal siege](#), since the government has secured a firm grip over the public sphere. If the legitimacy of representation derives from the consent of the governed, that legitimacy is suspect where the consent is obtained through deception.

Those not content with taking popular will as natural and evident thus find in deception an opening to a deeper level of analysis. “We must be careful to avoid attributing these happenings to some notion of inherent prejudice that prevails among our people,” Afroz, a senior union leader, clarified. “After all, various communities were previously living together in relative peace—the situation was never this bad.” She cited her elderly neighbor to illustrate the changing attitudes. “I have known her all my life as a gracious, mild-mannered woman. She is often sitting on the *charpoy*

[woven cot] outside; we sometimes chat for a few minutes when I am leaving or returning home. Of late, I have been noticing that she, too, has started reciting the same bigoted ideas about Muslims.” Other participants nodded in sympathetic understanding, this pattern of radicalization familiar to us from friends and relatives.

It is easier to demonize people in the absence of personal interactions with them, the gathering concurred. The prevalence of prejudice is exacerbated in places where there is little contact with individuals who belong to different communities. Across India, with increasing social homogenization of neighborhoods in both urban and rural regions, everyday encounters between religious communities are becoming so scarce that pernicious stereotypes and misconceptions can persist unchecked. “What is surprising is that if a Muslim vendor selling blankets or utensils were to visit,” Afroz finished her point, “she would still invite him inside and ask him for water.”

STRATEGIES FOR DISPELLING

This disjunction between everyday experience and political rhetoric presents a challenge, but it is also an opportunity for activism. “We should realize that things that seem obvious to us, those things may not be evident for others,” another voice interjected, gesturing at all present. People may be living in siloed communities, arriving at basic orientations through particular biographies, and it would be arrogant to expect that they should be operating with the same common sense as those assembled. So, rather than assuming that people’s beliefs were simply a matter of individual determination, activists had to address the troubling ideology through their work.

This was, to begin with, a matter of countering state discourse with genuine awareness. In the cacophony of state-sponsored narratives, the manipulation of information for political gain has muddied the waters of public discourse, making it increasingly difficult to separate fact from fiction. The difficulty of reposing trust in the veracity of information under-

mines the foundation upon which sound political judgment rests, leaving individuals adrift in a sea of deception. Fact-finding reports are therefore a vital tool for activists attempting to challenge propaganda. Recently, some members of this group began collecting and collating the experiences of people affected by extrajudicial killings in western Uttar Pradesh, getting the reports photocopied when printing presses refused publication and organizing collective reading sessions in neighborhoods to develop a better understanding of the everyday realities people faced.

Instead of searching for ways to reliably identify “conspiracy theories” so as to swiftly condemn them, it may be more fruitful to explore their implications for enabling certain kinds of political practice.

More crucially, tackling deception required cultivating conditions that would enable people to realize the chasm between their perceptions and their interests. One way activists approach this is through monthly “inter-dining,” which brings people from different communities together to share a meal. Long a cherished tactic for social reformers in a society where dietary and commensality restrictions are integral to caste hierarchies and religious purity, inter-dining efforts are targeted at young people, in particular, since they are considered less entrenched in their worldviews. Eating and drinking together in a common physical and social setting is a means to construct social relations characterized by intimacy and equality. Gradually, participants may begin to develop familiarity with each other and identify shared concerns preoccupying them. Grassroots efforts such as these are aimed at challenging stereotypes and promoting intergroup dialogue at the local level. By facilitating meaningful interactions across sectarian

divides, such initiatives seek to encourage people to align their desires more faithfully with their interests. In doing so, they hope to harness the routine exercises of everyday life to counter deceptive narratives by building common ground.

CONSPIRING FOR DEMOCRACY

As half the world is scheduled to hold national elections in 2024, watchdogs are apprehensive about the global state of democracy. With [barely half of these polls expected to meet the criteria of being free and fair](#), the translation of popular will in electoral verdicts is bound to be contested, generating anxiety among the commentariat about the vulnerability of electoral integrity to devious misinformation campaigns. Rather than dismissing these disputes as necessarily driven by ulterior motives, we may do well to recognize that [“conspiracy theory,” like social theory, attempts to connect apparently unrelated cultural phenomena and explain the hidden mechanisms of power](#).

Instead of searching for ways to reliably identify “conspiracy theories” so as to swiftly condemn them, it may be more fruitful to explore their implications for enabling certain kinds of political practice. In our case, the attribution of deception keeps the issue of legitimate political representation open as a question, refusing to let it be settled by elections. It allows activists to introduce a gap between the desires of the people and their interests—what they want versus what benefits them. Within this gap, activist work locates an opportunity to mold aspirations in alignment with well-being. At a time when people around the world appear vulnerable to demagogic persuasion, deception offers a valuable heuristic for thinking about how to combat political lies and misinformation, and ultimately revitalize democracy. 🌀

Nomaan Hasan is a PhD candidate in the Department of Anthropology at Brown University. Based on ethnographic research in northern India, his work examines modes of political (dis)appearance that evade state scrutiny.

Can You Tell, Just By Looking?

By Ariana Gunderson

The experience of eating is immersive; all of our senses are engaged when we sit down to eat. But how much can you know about food from its appearance? Can you tell real meat apart from fake meat—just by looking?

The German foodscape has a distinct richness in vegan simulacra of meat and dairy foods—supermarkets and restaurants offer vegan schnitzel, vegan liver pâté, vegan canned tuna, and a dizzying number of vegan yogurts. In my research, I investigate what possibilities fake meat opens up (or closes off) for eaters and explore the social implications of fake(d) meat. What aspects of sensory experience are replicable when one removes the *meat* from meat? What is lost and what is gained in a meat-free replication of meat? Copycat plant-based products aren't marketed under a veil of deception; a consumer can easily identify an item made without animal products based on the description and vegan certifications printed on the label. But the products are crafted to mirror as closely as possible the look, feel, and taste of the “real” thing, making possible a one-for-one swap; these meat dupes so effectively mimic the real thing that one need not change the menu.

This photo essay of original Polaroid photographs features both traditional animal-product Christmas market foods and vegan simulacra sold at German Christmas markets in 2023. The captions of each item do not reveal whether the food object is meat or a vegan re-creation, placing you, dear reader, in the position of guessing which is which. Can you tell which is which?



1

A paper dish of currywurst. Chopped bratwurst smothered in a curry-spiced ketchup sauce accompanied by chunky golden fries.



2

A mug of *Glühwein*, or mulled wine (most wine is not certified as vegan, as animal products are used in wine production). An icon of Christmas Markets, the warm spiced wine is splashed out in novelty mugs, for which visitors pay a deposit. Many choose to keep these mugs as souvenirs of their visit to the market.



3

A Belgian-style waffle, loaded up with whipped cream, strawberries, chocolate shavings, and a healthy showering of powdered sugar.



4

Drei im Weggla: three small sausages and sauerkraut served sandwich-style in a roll, with a mug of *Glühwein*. This is the canonical meal for visitors to the Nürnberg Christmas Market.



7

Elisenlebkuchen, a soft and nutty gingerbread prepared with warming spices and very little flour, dotted with three blanch almonds.



5

An open-faced sandwich schmearred with creamy herb spread, topped with smoked lox, onion, and dill.



8

A display of American-style donuts, including strawberry, cinnamon, and Christmas cookie flavors.



6

Bags of cookies and pralines on display for munching on at the market or to bring home as gifts.

Answers

Vegan: photos 1,2,3,5,6,8,

Not vegan: photos 4,7 🌀

Ariana Gunderson is a PhD student in cultural and linguistic anthropology at Indiana University. She studies the social, semiotic, and affective work of meat and fake meat in Europe, Polaroid camera in hand. You can learn more about her work at www.arianagunderson.com.



Outside the facility. ERIN ROUTON

A Reliable Narrator

By Erin Routon

“You are too old to be a refugee.”

“You can’t stay in this country unless you serve four years in the military. And then when your kid is old enough, he has to serve four years too.”

“If you don’t have a police report that confirms what you’re telling me, you’re going to be deported. They’ll know you’re lying. You have to have proof to stay here.”

“You are a liar. You couldn’t have come this long of a way on your own. Not without a [coyote](#). You’re telling me that you didn’t have a coyote? Then you must be a coyote yourself.”

“You are a liar. You don’t look like a rape victim.”

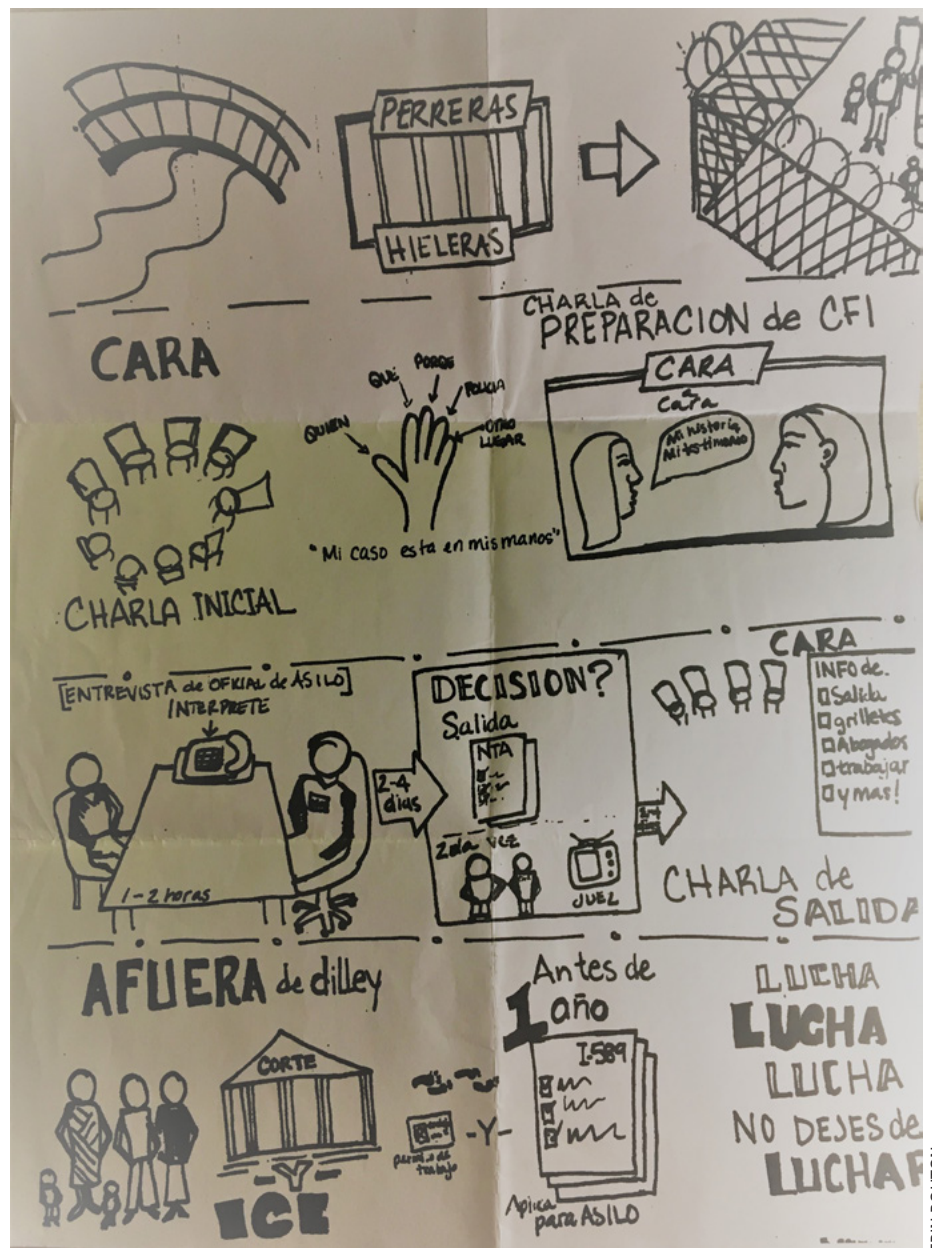
“The border is closed. Tell your families to stop coming here. We have a new president. Everyone will be deported.”

These are just some of the lies and accusations of deception told to asylum-seeking families by immigration officials in their first encounter at the Mexico-US border. As families recounted these experiences, often through exhaustion and tears, legal advocates, including myself, sat, listened, and recorded. Then, working with the families, we corrected those lies and refuted those accusations repeatedly. This wasn’t the reason we were meeting where and when we did—in a detention center for families—but it became a necessary part of our work, as much as anything else. Indeed, deception plays an important role in the story here, too.

The story begins in Dilley, a small country town in South Texas. In 2015, amid [rising arrivals of asylum-seeking families](#) along the Mexico-US border, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) constructed and opened a facility in Dilley intended to detain some of those families while they underwent one of the initial stages of the legal process: the credible or reasonable fear interview. Thus, after requesting asylum and being selected for placement within an expedited legal category, a single parent and their minor-age children were transferred from an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) holding facility to one of these centers. In order to be released, continuing with their application, they would have to “pass” this interview with an asylum officer. If deemed not “credible” or eligible for asylum, they were subject to immediate deportation.

Around the opening of this facility, a coalition of national legal nonprofits formed to provide continuous *pro bono* legal assistance to those detained, relying heavily on volunteer labor. Like many immigrant rights groups at the time, these advocates were deeply disturbed by the practice of incarcerating asylum-seekers, especially children, and recognized the need to mobilize legal aid for those detained in what was the largest immigrant detention facility in the United States. They did this work for several years, across multiple presidential administrations and substantial fluctuations in asylum policies. Only within the last couple of years did the practice of family detention, in this specific form, cease.

I have written previously about the efforts and perspectives of these legal advocates, including how they experienced [trauma in their work](#) and how it, effectively, constituted a form of [care labor](#), which I call “legal care.” The most important role these advocates played in this facility was, arguably, that of a kind of story translator: in helping detained families understand complex legal processes and communicate the experiences that qualified them for asylum, they ultimately helped them to pass their interviews and get released,



A drawn document provided to detainees to help them actually understand the process, from entry to the country to the continuation of their legal asylum cases.

rather than deported. Their work wasn't about long-term representation; it was about climbing over this first hurdle. Their labor was [deeply meaningful, careful, and yet also painful](#).

Here I explore something that is pervasively [associated with asylum-seekers or migration in general](#) in the public imagination: deception. It is still common to hear the refrain that asylum-seekers intention-

Deception, in truth, is a prominent feature of both the material conditions of this form of detention and the entwined relationships therein.

ERIN ROUNTON

ally lie about their life circumstances in order to be given asylum, designated as “bogus,” or fraudulent, cases. This attitude filtered into how immigration officers often approached interviews, as I both witnessed and learned from numerous asylum seekers and advocates. Such associations, of course, are often spurred by—and subsequently reinforce—[xenophobic beliefs and attitudes](#) toward different migrant groups, rather than through any sort of grounded reality or broad awareness of either international issues or acceptable legal categories for applicants. However, this story is about neither this harmful association nor the simple fact that, of course, legal fabrication exists. Instead, I acknowledge and explore deception’s integral place in such a space, but not in the way you might think. Deception, in truth, is a prominent feature of both the material conditions of this form of detention and the entwined relationships therein.

A FRONT

Here, on a barren, dusty plot of land, lies four walls, two doors, several spare office spaces, a long, windowless middle space, and one special little room for coloring books, cheap plastic toys, and miniature chairs. It’s in this space—a mobile trailer converted into an office—that volunteer legal advocates met with the asylum-seeking mothers and children that were held there. Beyond this are many other temporary structures of similar size and feel, connected through raised metal walkways or beige concrete paths. Still other spaces exist in this sort of compound, surrounded by multistoried, locked fences, cameras, and rows of floodlights that remain on throughout the night.

Near the entrance—which is effectively hidden from public view by a long, unmarked road that vanishes into a wide blue sky—you’ll find a sign that’s meant to tell you what it is: the South Texas Family Residential Center. On the same sign, you’ll find the letters “CCA,” referring to the former Corrections Corporation of America. This business, now known as CoreCivic, is one of the nation’s largest and



BIRGIT MEYER

Outside the rental property, next to the facility, where some legal advocates stayed while working there.

[most lucrative private prison corporations.](#) They own and operate this facility, and many other detention centers, through [highly profitable contracts](#) with ICE.

Side-by-side, these denotations would seem to have very different connotations. What is this place, and what is it for? Really, it depended on who you asked. Inside this collection of edifices—which legal advocates call a “baby jail”—you’d find further evidence of what appeared to be a very conflicted sense of functional identity. You’d see and hear evidence that suggested this place is of a noncarceral nature, with detainee dormitory units identified by a color and creature (such as “blue butterfly”). You’d quickly be made aware of the strict controls and limitations on movement within, while also being coerced into referring to staff not as guards but as “residential supervisors.” Promotional materials for the center touted the “amenities” for “residents,” like childcare or Zumba classes, while legal advocates and nondetained family members were repeatedly denied access to meet with those detained.

The misidentification of this place as primarily one for those to simply “reside” had real effects. Beyond the most obvious—misleading both detainees and an underinformed public about their function and profit incentive—the legal advocates’ work was impacted by this confusion. Advocates’ efforts were, in so many ways, predicated on their ability to establish trust with detainees, which they needed

in order to get to the kinds of vulnerable, frank conversations necessary to help prepare their legal cases. But how does one conjure a sense of trust within such a deceptive space? Molly, a legal advocate and experienced immigration attorney from Colorado, shared how even when, under normal circumstances, you are good at establishing that kind of relationship with a “client,” this “weird, artificial prison” changes things: “I mean, I think it would be my natural instinct not to trust anybody in that environment,” she said.

Molly wasn’t wrong; the nature of the environment, a space of conflicting architecture and identities, informed this sense of unease, a sense that you might not be able to trust whatever stood in front of you. Was it there to give a moment of respite for asylum-seekers or punish them for even making the journey? This second point was only reinforced by comments from the previous secretary of homeland security, Jeh Johnson, who, [at the opening of the facility](#), described it as a “message to illegal migrants.” Of course, asylum-seekers are just that—people who are exercising a legal right to seek asylum—just as the families were that were being detained at this center.

Further, this unease, a sense of being caught in-between, was infused in the very architecture. Nearly all of the center’s structures were, and continue to be, temporary—mobile trailers that made more sense in the context of, say, underfunded

crisis response. The makeshift conditions of the spaces evoked a feeling that, like a traveling circus, you might just show up one day to an empty field, having no idea what happened to the “residents” within. This mirrored the experience of laboring as a legal advocate upon the ever-shifting terrain of exclusionary migration policies and practices. The environment mattered, what it looked and felt like, and legal advocates fought to affirm this sense for those they helped. Every day, in order to move forward—in building that trust, demonstrating that they were there to help, that they wanted to get folks free—advocates had to start somewhere. Because the unstable material nature of the center muddled everyone’s sense of reality, building those sorts of relationships took more work and, consequently, a unique toll.

WORKING THE FRAME

When legal advocates met folks in family detention, they worked to prepare them for their asylum interview. They listened and asked questions about why a particular individual was seeking asylum, but in a different way than an asylum officer. As a detainee began their story, the advocate was listening and following up with an awareness of acceptable legal categories for asylum, with an eye (or ear) toward the details that require either highlighting or fleshing out for greater effect when the time for their interview came. The work in that preparatory meeting was to take all the little pieces—the subtle and not-so-subtle nuances, the histories, even the apparent gaps—of an applicant’s self-narration of their life and help shape it into terms intelligible for the limited allowances of asylum law. From one standpoint, such work makes complete, reasonable sense; from another, it opened them up to a serious charge.

On multiple occasions, advocates were accused of encouraging detainees to lie in their interviews, either to wholly fabricate claims or to repeat legal terms and concepts simply to pass that interview, whether or not they actually applied to an individual’s case. Sometimes this was

a direct accusation from asylum officers suspicious of legal advocates’ work and motivations. I experienced this myself as an advocate who attended many interviews in support of the women I had helped prepare. Other times, it was more of a kind of gossip that circulated among other skeptical administrators and staff of the facility. Some asylum officers chose to characterize what legal advocates did in preparing detainees for their interviews as “coaching,” which, in their pejorative framing, was deceitful.

How an asylum-seeker’s story was told, how it was translated to a potentially skeptical or disinterested listener, mattered. Such is true of any story, one might argue, but in this case, the outcome could mean life or death.

In truth, this is a curious charge, particularly when it comes to the interview stage of the asylum process. In the interview, detainees were called upon to tell a story that covered both their individual experiences that led them to flee their homelands and their subsequent need to be given protection through asylum. Rather than simply telling a story of one’s life, detainees often needed both information around this and preparation. Understanding how to navigate complex legal processes, like asylum, is like learning a game. Joe, a retired attorney from Austin who frequently volunteered in family detention, coincidentally used this coaching analogy to describe the necessity of their work: “The interview is like a basketball game, and [our preparations with them] are like practice,” he said. “You can’t go out onto the court without knowing the rules of the game first.” While not a game, legal processes, like this interview, have rules, expectations, allowances—a language all their own. The work that legal advocates

undertook served to make all this comprehensible for applicants, and consequently, to help them maneuver this translation, effectively on their own, as advocates could not “represent” or speak for them during the interview.

It’s odd, disorienting even, to suggest that advocates’ preparatory work impedes the “truth-telling” exercise that is an asylum interview. Such a claim implies that a person telling a story doesn’t need to know what matters to the person listening: that the truth simply issues forth on its own. But this idea relies on some concerning assumptions, not least of which is that this is, in fact, an opportunity for a person to tell their story on their own terms. The problem, of course, is this isn’t how an asylum interview operates. It’s a back-and-forth, an exchange of questions and answers, a moment that often calls for self-advocacy (for which an applicant would need to recognize themselves). If a relevant question isn’t asked, a point not followed up on, an applicant might miss that moment to share those parts of their story that mean something to this process. If not or improperly prepared for that moment, it could pass unnoticed, in an instant, changing the direction of their lives yet again. How an asylum-seeker’s story was told, how it was translated to a potentially skeptical or disinterested listener, mattered. Such is true of any story, one might argue, but in this case, the outcome could mean life or death.

A FALSE END

Knowing where to start or end a story, even if it is your own, is not as straightforward as it sounds. If a single, life-altering event happens to you, beginning and concluding that tale might be easier. But what if the alteration of your life happened in pieces, at different times, maybe without a clear connection? Do you think about your life as a linear, progressive sequence of events, and if pressed, could you talk about it in a way that convinces a complete stranger that you’re telling the truth? Telling a compelling, convincing story isn’t just about what matters or means something to you. It’s also about knowing what matters

to your listener (or reader). Knowing what matters and convincingly narrating that to your audience isn't a question of whether you're telling the truth; in some cases, the truth is beside the point. The point is about you and thus your story's proximity to something reliable, intelligible to others.

Trying to do so under duress, like following a traumatic journey or while incarcerated, only compounds the challenge. Sometimes, especially when everything is on the line, people need help getting there, and for that matter, staying.

When asylum-seeking parents and children first met with legal advocates in a little mobile trailer in Dilley, they told varied yet familiar stories of that first encounter with ICE and CBP officers. Those stories were often marked by trauma and confusion: untranslated paperwork that must be signed; family members' forcefully, and at times violently, separated from one another; and, as shown at the top of this

article, the repeated use of degrading and offensive remarks. But those experiences were also marked by clear expressions of deception, sometimes in the form of blatant fabrications and other times as misleading mistruths. Legal advocates in family detention played a critical role in countering these lies. Deceptive immigration practices, of course, don't end there, but [are deeply entangled with US migrant detention](#) on a grander scale.

What those advocates also effected, though, was a counternarrative, or alternative story: one that challenged false narratives of deceptive asylum-seekers caught in ambiguous "residency." All of this highlighted the irony of charges of deceit leveled against both. In their narrative, these families were being punished through incarceration and a harsh expedited legal process for simply exercising their right to seek asylum, and this country's influential private prison industry ben-

efitted immensely from such a turn of political events. Even still, as the practice of family detention [eventually ended](#), it was replaced with a wave of new and some would argue [crueler forms](#) of exclusion for asylum-seekers. This, unfortunately, has upended much of our collective sense of any individual's legal right to seek protection through asylum, particularly when [framed as something inherently exceptional](#). Facing an [uncertain future](#), one might begin to wonder if there was ever a reliable story to begin with. Surprisingly, even in detention, it can be easy to lose your sense of direction. 🌀

Erin Routon is an assistant professor of anthropology in the Department of Comparative Cultural Studies at the University of Houston in Houston, Texas. Her current research and writing focus on the intersections between immigration, incarceration, activism, and care work.

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Deception as Investment: How to Make Digital Ponzi Schemes in China

By Yichen Rao

In the dim light of a Monday morning in August 2018, Meng, a 33-year-old woman living near Beijing, began her day with a sense of urgency. Rising at 5:40 a.m., she navigated her morning routine with haste, quietly brushing her teeth, washing her face, and skillfully applying makeup, careful not to disturb her still-sleeping family. Her mission: to reach her neighborhood in time for the 6:15 a.m. company bus that awaited her, marking the start of another workweek.

As a data analyst for a major IT company, Meng traveled from the western suburbs of Beijing to the eastern side, where the company is based, every weekday morning. Navigating Beijing's notorious morning gridlock, Meng opted for the company bus



ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/DILOK KLAISATAPORN

to remotely clock in, safeguarding against late penalties, even if it took two or three hours each way to the office.

In the midst of her busy day, Meng found solace on the company bus, checking her smartphone's Daily Wealth app, an investing app that connects users to an online lending platform. The platform, different from a regulated bank, is operated by a mid-sized IT company in competition with thousands of others. Witnessing her savings grow by 200 yuan daily from a 500,000-yuan investment provided a sense of financial security. This autonomous income stream offered respite from the stress of her data analyst job, granting her

a measure of control over her well-being. These senses of security and control, largely shaped by semiotic performances in app designs, are essential parts of deception enacted by these platforms.

Despite a comparatively high salary, Meng still felt dissatisfied with her job, mostly from her arduous commutes and intense job pressure. Her mortgage tied her to her current location, which also promised her child a good schooling environment. At her age, promotion hinged on proving her value, yet the threat of layoffs loomed, as the company eyed cost-cutting through the recruitment of cheaper, younger talent for junior roles.

Dreaming of early retirement and an escape from the relentless competition, Meng envisioned a future where investments on Daily Wealth could grant her financial freedom. This aspiration, she discovered, was shared among her colleagues. Many IT professionals, grappling with demanding work hours and the looming specter of being “optimized” before 38, sought avenues to augment their income through financial investments.

A month later, however, her dream turned into a nightmare. One morning, while commuting on her usual bus route, she discovered that she couldn’t access her Daily Wealth account. Desperate for answers, she reached out to her consultant, a former colleague who had introduced her to the platform, but received no response. It wasn’t until she stumbled upon news in her colleagues’ WeChat group that she learned Daily Wealth had been shut down by the police. The platform faced accusations of operating as a Ponzi scheme, generating fake assets to lure in investors, all while managing funds without the required financial license.

The accusation is a familiar one in the landscape of collapsed digital financial platforms in China. Many of these peer-to-peer (P2P) lending platforms, registered as IT companies, offered “innovative” financial solutions to meet the individual needs of lenders and borrowers. Between 2012 and 2015, thousands of P2P platforms emerged, only to crumble within a few years, destroying the life savings of countless middle-class families. Meng’s experience was just one among millions.

DECEIVE TO SURVIVE

P2P lending, which emerged in the United Kingdom in 2005 with the platform Zopa, resembles a dating app. Strangers or acquaintances meet and match with each other to form lending relationships. China’s first P2P platform, PPDai (Paipaidai), emerged in 2007, founded by IT graduates amid limited regulations. However, the model struggled to thrive in China due to credit matching inefficiencies (as one can only collect funds individually) and elevated default risks associated with online private loans.



Archived webpage (ppdai.com) on Aug. 9, 2007, highlighting how individual lenders and borrowers match with each other in a community.

But after years of exploration, the P2P platforms started to “innovate” their models by acting like unregulated banks, while claiming that they were doing “information” matching. In 2012, they started selling wealth management products, the borrowers’ debts bundled by the platform, to the lenders. This bundling allowed the lending relationships to form more efficiently than by letting the lenders and borrowers wait and match by themselves. Platforms introduced distinct apps for wealth management and credit lending, treating borrowers’ debts as marketable “assets,” with attractive returns for investors. This shift detached investors from the personal aspect of a debt relationship, allowing them to earn 20 to 30 percent annual interest—significantly higher than the 3 to 5 percent offered by traditional banks. This investment could be easily made by anyone with a Chinese bank account through instant money transfers within the application, represented as digital figures.



Archived webpage (ppdai.com) on March 28, 2015, highlighting the high annual rate, professional services, and safety for investors if using their investment app.

The easily achieved high return, portrayed as unequivocally “safe, professional and lucrative” products, lured investors unaware of the high risk.

The P2P industry thrived in 2014, championing financial inclusion (*puhui jinrong*) endorsed by the state. This initiative aimed to provide financial services to small businesses, rural residents, and low-income populations. The number of P2P platforms surged from 10 in 2012 to nearly 4,000 in 2015. The absence of proper regulation fueled a competitive cycle, driving platforms to launch aggressive “innovations” like higher interest rates, flexible withdrawals, risk-free trials, and referral bonuses to attract individual investors and secure investments from the capital market. Many claimed to establish security deposit pools, assuring investors could recover funds even in case of borrower defaults, adding an additional deceptive layer, as their insurance capabilities have never been audited by a third party. Platforms, now operating as money schemes, faced immediate bankruptcy risks without sustained “traffic” from potential investors, leading to a surge in unsupported promises masked as financial innovations.

In response to widespread social unrest caused by the collapse of digital Ponzi schemes, the Chinese state intensified regulation in 2017, accelerating the market’s decline. Despite the hope for formal licensing for surviving platforms, many struggled to adapt to new rules. By 2021, the state officially ended all remaining P2P lending platforms to curb risks from spreading to other financial sectors. I conducted fieldwork among Chinese middle-class investors from 2018 to 2021, precisely during the period marked by the industry’s decline, to capture people’s shifting perception of their financial lives. Even amid the industry’s decline, P2P investors unaffected by platform bankruptcy were reportedly “the happiest” in China, per a 2018 China Academy of Social Sciences [survey](#). This curated sense of “happiness” represents a technified financial affect—a deceptive technology that keeps people oblivious to significant potential risks.

For investors facing losses, the collapse of once-thriving P2P platforms felt like a massive betrayal from both platform operators and the state. However, most platform operators and the state did not aim to scam. As the state endeavors to cultivate fintech companies as catalysts for economic stimulation, there lies a strategic imperative for major platforms. These entities, drawing significant capital investment, recognize that formal licensing and regulation offer a pathway to sustained profitability far more reliable than the transient gains derived from illicit schemes. Among the individual investors, early quitters often profited, and initial gains were possible for those who eventually lost money, despite that the financial flows and return guarantees are not closely regulated. While major P2P platforms were not initially designed as scams, the use of deceptive technologies, such as the unfounded guarantees and simulated money growth shown in apps, was necessary to gain investor trust before the platforms could be formally licensed. It is these deceptive technologies, maintaining trust in this transitional space, that pique my interest. They unveil broader insights into the social imaginaries established by digital capitalism and their impact on ordinary users.

As an anthropologist, I witnessed investors navigating deceptive technologies. In initial interviews, they unconsciously reassured themselves, despite other platforms collapsing as Ponzi schemes, that “their” platform would be fine because “it has been operating ever since 2010,” “it was advertised on national TV,” “it was too big to fail,” “it is now ‘compliant’ under new regulations,” or “it is listed on NASDAQ.” The platforms’ grand images serve as a reflection of their own untarnished positive self-images as “smart investors.” In post-loss interviews, some reflected bitterly on their ignorance of their self-deceptions. Meanwhile, others persisted in rejecting the “Ponzi scheme participant” label imposed by the state, asserting, “I am an investor lured by the government for their ‘financial inclusion.’ Now I am part of a crime in their definition.”

These investors were not merely putting their money into a platform; they were also investing their selves in the images reflected by financial technologies and aspirations. Initially, the state empowered individuals to self-identify as “investors,” while granting symbolic authority to P2P platforms as innovative technologies. However, by reclassifying innovations as crimes, the state has disavowed the legitimacy of people’s now “deceptive” identities.

INVESTING IN THE SIGNS OF HOPE

Reflecting about her trust in Daily Wealth, Meng said, “I could see my money growing on a daily basis and in real time. Previously there were times when I would try to withdraw some money to my bank account when the investment period ended—and it was often transferred almost instantly! Even if there were delays, I could easily find my former colleague who work for the platform to help speed up the transfer.” Even when she encountered account access issues, which turned out to be caused by police intervention, her immediate reaction was, “Oh, that could be a system bug.” Here, the integration of human and cybernetic systems through app design further solidified people’s belief in the stability and power of P2P platforms.

Meng seamlessly interacted with the app interface, orchestrating visualized signs registering legitimate money (as promising numbers), financial stability (as smooth user experiences), and the prowess of financial technologies, shaping her identity as a “smart investor” (as nimble control over her money). This engagement allowed her to internalize a self-deceptive sense of control over her life in general. Observing stable daily financial gains transformed Meng into a more discerning financial subject, fostering prudent spending habits with an eye on potential savings for a happier future. Confronted with “offline” challenges, such as in relocating and career advancement, and enduring lengthy commutes, Meng found solace and addiction in the smooth mobility of her online financial experience. The deliberately crafted “user experience,”

coupled with visual representations of money movements, established a virtual connection, as if these intelligent financial actions were extensions of one’s body.

Digital investment goes beyond placing money in a platform; it’s a social movement enabling Chinese individuals to envision themselves as capable participants in the intricate financial realm. It offers a sense of agency, allowing them to feel “financially included” in China’s progressive movements toward a better future. The sense of agency experienced by investors is shaped by technologies in two key ways: first, technologies aligning with state financial innovation campaigns become positive symbols inspiring people; second, these technologies generate derivative symbols to further naturalize people’s financial desire, fostering better self-imaginings through micro-interactions.

The micro-projects of hope investment are situated within the “financial inclusion” movement emblematic of China’s strategic investment in catalyzing developmental symbols at a macro-level without imposing heavy regulations on new technologies. However, amid this orchestrated drive for progress, a dichotomy emerges. While discerning hopeful symbols as lucrative prospects, many fintech entrepreneurs embark on speculative ventures, harboring aspirations to become China’s “Capital One.” Yet, with unregulated competition, more and more individuals exploit the veneer of hope, engaging in deceptive practices to get rich first. Deception, therefore, unfolds as a complex interplay of symbolic investment among the state, platforms, and people, blurring the boundaries between aspiration and exploitation, all the while shaping China’s financial landscape. 🌀

Yichen Rao is an assistant professor of anthropology at Utrecht University. He completed postdoctoral fellowships in MIT and University of Michigan, where he further developed his research focus on techno-fetishisms in China’s fin-tech industry, gaming sphere, and digital infrastructures. He received his PhD in anthropology and STS from University of Hong Kong.

Vazaha Always Want to Know, But We Talk Like Dreams

By Cory-Alice André-Johnson

Based on a combination of stories, lived experiences, and lies from my research on not-knowing in Belo, this fictive ethnographic narrative recounts a night spent in fear of an attack by dahalo (local bandits). Over the course of the night, the narrator moves between waking and sleep as they try to make sense of the bandits' attack based on bits of unreliable information. Like many stories people told me in Belo, it does not end with a clear conclusion or moral but instead with a tapering of gossip and a return to silence, pregnant with the possibility of ambiguity. Blurring together mundane life, ostentatious lies, and unbelievable truths, the narrative evokes what one of the women I work with in Belo described as talking like a dream. Where vazaha (the term for foreigners, usually European and American) seek to pick apart talk in order to know the deeper meaning and intentions of speakers, this woman explained, Gasy speakers experience talk like a dream, some of it true, some of it not.

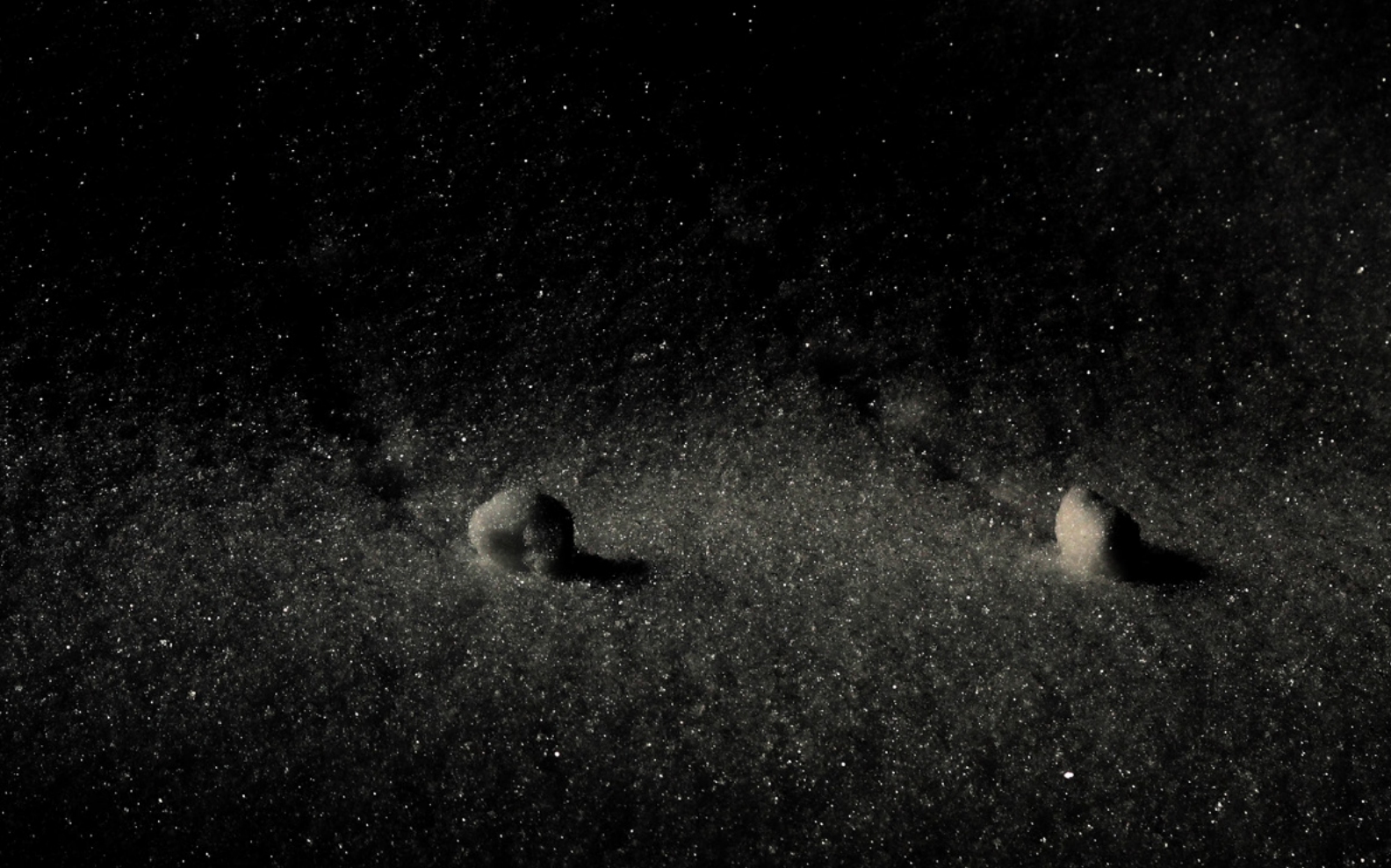
I felt for their breath. I could not hear it over the silence of the dark room and my ears' refusal to focus on anything but the cracks and claps that conjure fears of bullets let go in the night or men just beyond the door. I sensed from its absence that my sister held theirs in too.

Maybe, like mine, their body had let go of the frivolity of air to focus on deciphering how far away that shot must have come from, or how to tell the difference between a machine gun and a barking dog from this distance, or if we had both heard that engine rev, or how to turn our heads toward each other without making a sound and see through the dark

into each other's eyes to confirm, or to make a plan, or only to see each other one last time and hold that moment for as long as it took for whoever shot the gun to get in whatever SUV's engine had revved and make their way to our house to beat us or take us or do terrible things that I could not know, but my sister knew. I caught the muscles in my hand before they reached

across the bed and quelled the impulse to an almost inaudible flinch. It would have startled them more than appeased—or worse, disclosed our presence to the dahalo who we had heard make their way into the courtyard. I tried to return my own breath to a slow dissipation of swells on a calm sea. At least I imagined it moved like that when I slept, and I wanted my sister to think that I slept. Maybe then they would go to sleep too, trusting that I knew that fear had made this danger up. I tried to convince my heartbeat to lie to them, to tell them that I had only heard the wind in the palms or the stumbling cough of a rum drinker going home. Don't act stupid, their deathly still body reminded me. Not even rum drinkers dared to go out that night.

I had forgotten to keep track of how much time had passed since I heard the men come into the courtyard. Had enough minutes of silence followed them in for me to give up believing in them? Or had I only let myself get distracted for long enough for them to sneak into a position where they could wait for me to fall asleep? I felt for their looming just beyond the walls and



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resolved to challenge it with an alertness that could outlast their stillness. Don't act stupid, my sister chastised me again. If they had gotten this far, nothing we could do would stop them. Not my vigilance or my light skin. Despite what folks said, they did not fear us. They already knew where we stayed. They knew we could not have taken to the sea like everyone else because our father and brother had left with the outriggers months ago when they followed the wind and fish up north. Had they known when they came the first time too? My sister said that they come in the night like this. That they had waited until morning, when their mother woke to make donuts before the sun broke. That they had hit the woman and forced themselves into the house where my sister still slept with the blanket pulled up to their hair. That they had put a bag over their head and told them not to make any noise. That they must have walked through the mangrove at high tide because my sister felt the water up to their thighs and their feet sinking in the mud until sharp roots cut them and crabs pinched them. How did they know

about my sister? How did they know that only women stayed in the house at the time? Or that their mother woke up early to make donuts?

Nenikely insisted that someone from the community must have helped them. How else could they have known their way through the mangrove? Or which house to find my sister in? We all knew who, of course. Nenikely never said their name, but everyone knew they had gotten rich helping *dahalo* steal cattle and bones. Even if things had not gone the way my sister said, as I had heard a few folks suggest, someone still must have told the bandits where to find them and that they could probably get money by asking the foreigner for a ransom. Their second store opened onto the main road north of the gendarmes office. They must have seen my sister sneaking home in the early hours of the morning. They must have heard the whispers about where the woman spent their nights. It made more sense that the bandits would have taken them over there. They wouldn't have needed to come so far into town, passed the gendarmes office,

through the small passageways between courtyards, down where the only escape meant knowing the sea or knowing the mangrove. Up north, they could have driven right up beside the woman as the sun still lulled its way to the horizon and snatched them before their scream could reach the nearest ears.

The jolt from the sound that reached mine in that moment almost broke through the weight of fear that pressed me so deep into the mattress I could feel each edge of the wood slats below it. It yanked my mind back from its restless wanderings to remember to sense for my sister's learned stillness. It tried in vain to yank my body up into action as well, but somewhere our shared blood refused the ocean that separated us and made my body learn from theirs the stillness it had never known. If I had convinced myself that I could not remember the sound of shots fired at human flesh, that delusion left me with all my breath. I could only hope I had heard the gendarmes, so close now that they must have reached the Protestant church. I could only hope that Nenikely had called

them. Awake like us in the neighboring house, they must have heard the *dahalo* enter the yard, braved the dangerous rustling of their duvet to reach for their phone, hidden its glaring white lights as they retrieved the captain's number that they had stored the day before when news spread of the impending raid. Or had they never even gotten into bed, sat up ready for this moment, protecting their child and grandchild with the determination they owed their sister and I mine.

I broke my promise and reached for their hand. I knew where to find it, cradling the growing slope of their lower belly. Like everyone else, I had seen them eat donuts and fried fish. I had seen them dance all night on New Year's Eve, and though I had not seen it with my own eyes, I had heard they drank that night too. I had seen them shake a stranger's hand and go with Gloriano's mom to Ernestine's house. Some people still ate oily food while pregnant, though, and dancing would not hurt the fetus despite everyone's insistence that doctors said pregnant women shouldn't dance like that. Maybe Gloriano's mom, not my sister, still got a Depo shot even though they told their husband they would have another child, and the stranger's handshake looked more like a mistake of habit. I could not believe the rumors that they faked the pregnancy. For what? People said to get money from their lover or to convince them to take them abroad. Maybe just to talk, but now they could not admit they had lied because of everything that had happened. Not just the kidnapping, because people said they lied about that too. They probably snuck out early in the morning and stayed with a friend in the next village over for a few days. Maybe if the foreigner thought they had gotten kidnapped while pregnant with their child, they would send even more money or acquiesce to marriage. When the money never came, they walked back to town and told everyone they had escaped the *dahalo*.

If *dahalo* had really kidnapped them for ransom as they said, if they had stayed three days and nights with them

cooking their food and cleaning their clothes, if they knew how to describe where they stayed and how many of them the gendarmes would find in the spiny forest on the southwestern edge of Ambanyranomena just before the path opens out onto the beach, why hadn't they recognized the leader's face when someone brought them the photo? How could they have? It took me several minutes to even recognize a figure. What part of their face remained recognizable blurred into the sand it lay in and the grain of the cellphone screen on which it circulated. How could they have recognized a face when someone needed to use their pinky nail to point to brain matter in the sand and trace the outline of the gaping hole in the back of the man's head before any of us could recognize any human at all in the photo? For what? Because after a month of angered searching the gendarmes had caught the man? Did they confess? Or did everyone already know that that man had led the *dahalo* the night of the shootout, when the gendarmes had surprised them in the spiny forest on the southwestern edge of Ambanyranomena just before the path opens out onto the beach, when they had killed one *dahalo*, when one gendarme lost an ear, because my sister came home one morning with cut-up feet, smelling of rum and fire, having escaped their captors over the preceding night, run down to the beach, through the rocks and coral along the edge of the water for hours because they knew that if anyone followed them that they may know the mangrove but they wouldn't know the sea.

I held their hand and felt the breath filling and emptying their gut. I knew they would have protected their child. I remembered the stories Nenikely would tell us of their own mother. I had never known them. They had passed during an appendectomy when the electricity in the hospital went out a few years before I first came to the island as an adult. They married my father long after my mother had moved back to the States with me and the man had quit playing soccer for Brazil

to return home. Nenikely told us how my father loved them so much that even when they had gone to prison, he spent all of his money to stay in town and bring them food every day. They gave birth to my sister there during a three-month sentence for breaking a man's nose who had tried to poison them out of jealousy that they had left to marry my father instead. I imagined you would do the same to protect your baby, so I trusted you despite what people said. Had you lied, what difference did it make now? Now the *dahalo* had come for their revenge. Now we had not taken to the sea. Now we fought off sleep out of fear, and Nenikely sat up through the night with their phone in their hand, and gendarmes fired shots down the alleyways and from behind market stalls.

I did not remember falling asleep or the noise that brought me back to an empty bed in a sun-filled house with the doors open and the curtains catching the wind. Outside, everyone had already finished breakfast except my sister, who offered me their last donut and a cup of tea. They laughed when I asked if the gendarmes had caught the bandits. What bandits? The ones from last night, in the yard? Don't act stupid, they laughed, nobody came last night. What of the noises? What noises? Hadn't they heard? I slept. The gunshots, the people in the yard. Probably dogs. And everyone who went to sea? People do too much when they get scared of *dahalo*. But everyone said they would come to seek revenge? People talk. They stood and began sweeping the yard. They had laundry to do and worried about where to find fish to fry for lunch since nobody had gone out the night before. 🌀

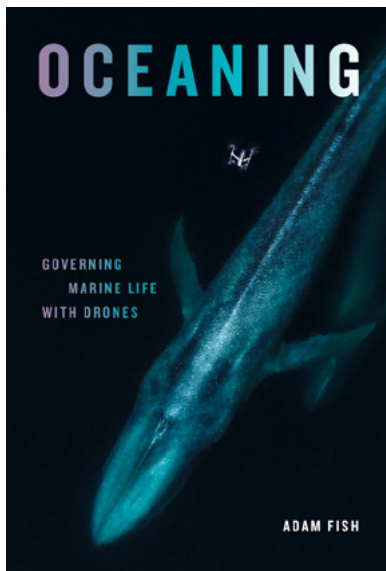
Cory-Alice André-Johnson is a postdoctoral fellow in Africana studies at Tulane University doing sociocultural research in southwest Madagascar on the ways people use refusal, opacity, and not-knowing in becoming human and building social ties. These then form the basis for developing decolonial anthropological methodologies, theories, and writing practices.



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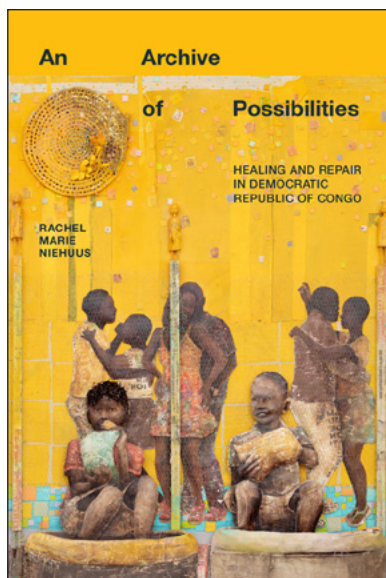
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Based on the Incredible True Story:

Colonial Minds, Late Capitalist Hearts, and Deception in Hollywood

By Karin Friederic

“Based on the Incredible True Story.” So begins the trailer for the film *Arthur the King*, starring Mark Wahlberg, Simu Liu, Nathalie Immanuel, and Ali Suliman: a heart-warming story about a stray, scruffy dog and an endurance athlete who find each other during an epic adventure race across the Dominican Republic. The tale—told in three different books in dozens of languages—has already captured the hearts of millions. As the [film’s poster](#) relates, the power of the narrative derives from three elements: An Unexpected Encounter. An Unlikely Bond. An Unforgettable Adventure. In all, the story speaks to perseverance and sacrifice, the deep connection between people and their dogs, and the possibility that a regular person can take on the bold heroism of “saving” a being at risk. And yet, we are never urged to consider whose truth this is, and what other truths may hide below the polished veneer of this “incredible true story.”

By sheer coincidence, I know some of these other truths. The real “Arthur,” it turns out, is from the village in Ecuador (not the Dominican Republic), where I have conducted fieldwork for over two decades. In contrast to the film’s depiction, I knew Barbuncho (his original name) to

be neither a stray nor abused. He was a much-loved farm and jungle dog who enjoyed gallivanting across cacao and coffee fields and following visiting doctors and tropical ecologists on jungle adventures. He provided deep comfort to his owner, Esteban (a pseudonym), after Esteban’s di-

voiced from his wife. Esteban wrote ballads in the dog’s honor for his deep companionship. A year after the dog’s “disappearance,” Esteban’s grandson lamented, “I really miss our dog. Why do *gringos* come here and take our dogs away?” referring to other instances when volunteers had adopted dogs and taken them home, though usually with the community’s consent.

What underlying sociocultural forces make a story feel believable? Why have so many people—in distinct corners of the world, including Ecuador itself—been so invested in the fictions, so much so that any small attempt to correct the narrative led to [charged accusations of abuse and even threats of violence and lynching](#)? This backlash illustrates the emotional sentiments and worldviews that shape belief, disbelief, and the contours of deception. As I’ve written [elsewhere](#) in a piece co-authored with students, this story of saviorism derives its power from the long arc of settler colonialism, white supremacy, and racialized forms of symbolic and structural violence. Revealing the dynamics of truth and (self-)deception in the Arthur story helps us see how racism and coloniality remain alive in—and gain traction from—even the simplest of tales.

BARBUNCHO, THE DOG BEHIND THE STORY

Back in 2014, my heart skipped a beat when I began to read a widely circulating [article](#) about a “stray” dog who “adopted a team of Swedish trekkers in the Amazon.” After being fed a meatball, the dog had followed Mikael Lindnord and his teammates on a long trek through deep mud, swaths of jungle, and even river crossings. It was a fantastic story, but it felt eerily familiar. Then I saw the photo of the dog in the

PRI article: it was Barbuncho, the happy, often-dirty canine who would jump at any opportunity to embark on a long adventure through the reserve where I had worked intermittently since the early 2000s. As it turns out, the adventure racers were not near the Amazon; despite the perceived similarities in jungle-y atmosphere, they were on the Ecuadorian coast.

At this point, I wrote my friends in Ecuador, and Esteban confirmed that his dog was missing. He found it very strange that there was such a global fuss about a dog tagging along on this trek, because it was what his dog always did. Barbuncho often followed others across the jungle (often foreign volunteers, sometimes Swedish ones like me), but he always returned “home” to the main village eventually. With its vast rainforest, awe-inspiring waterfalls, challenging mud trails, and teeming wildlife, this region was Barbuncho’s playground. We knew him to join whoever embarked on the most daring escapades, whether it was a team of tropical biologists studying the reserve’s fauna, medical volunteers conducting health campaigns, or Esteban himself while hunting for *paca* or *agouti*. Barbuncho also had multiple homes, just like his owner, splitting his time between a biological station, Esteban’s farm, and a tiny house in a densely populated village. If Esteban left one of these locations and his dog chose not to follow, other family members or friends would step in to feed him and keep him out of trouble. This communal safety net, which provided support for animals, children, and the elderly alike, was one of the things I appreciate most about this community. To those of us who knew the dog, Barbuncho loved his freedom, even if it was messy.

CORRECTING THE STORY

As soon as Esteban confirmed that this dog was Barbuncho, he asked that I contact Mikael Lindnord to alert him that the dog he was preparing to fly across the world did, in fact, belong to someone else. (My Ecuadorian friends all wondered why he never thought to ask anyone whose dog



Arthur The King movie poster.

“Saving” isn’t just directed at the dog with “all the diseases,” but at saving all of the Arthurs of the world from unkind “natives” everywhere.”



HELENA LINDNORD - ARTHUR AND MIKAEL, CC BY-SA 2.0
HTTPS://COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG/W/INDEX.PHP?CURID=140420646

Lindnord and Barbuncho, the dog behind “Arthur the King,” during the Adventure Racing World Championship in Ecuador in 2014.

it was; they all knew.) Esteban had been at his farm, where he had no electricity or internet, and he was initially unaware of all that had transpired. He was worried about not speaking English or Swedish (both languages I happen to speak), and he did not have social media on his phone at the time, communicating with me only through WhatsApp. While I understand that Lindnord was likely surprised and worried upon seeing my Facebook messages, especially given the press coverage he had already received, he raised concerns about animal abuse, even insinuating that I may be complicit. My mentions of rural life, poverty, or culturally different standards of pet-keeping conjured ridicule and detailed descriptions of Barbuncho’s back wound (from a tussle with another animal), poor teeth, and parasites. When I told my friends in Ecuador about these accusations, they laughed, responding, “Why is it such a big deal that Barbuncho had parasites and a wound? We all have parasites, machete wounds, infections, all of it. We’re poor and we get hurt while working the fields, producing cacao and all these products for all of you in the rest of the world.”

I wrote multiple news outlets to correct the story, but they wouldn’t have it. Admittedly, I yelled a bit on social media, and people insisted I was an animal abuser or, at best, an *agua fiesta* (a buzzkill). I expected my position would be unpopular, but I did not expect it to be so *unbelievable*. Most striking were people who acknowledged the unfair villainization of rural poor people of color on Ecuador’s coast and the blatant disregard for people’s lives and truths but who ultimately didn’t care because it was such a great story. It did not matter that this story of possession was made possible by the longer history of dispossession central to settler colonialism. In the end, Barbuncho made it to Sweden, to much [fanfare](#), and Lindnord set about making him a home and launching [a long career](#) based on this fortuitous event ten years ago. Together with the film premiere in late February 2024, Lindnord announced the release of a children’s book in four languages: *Young Arthur* presumably details for children the trials and tribulations of Arthur’s early life in the jungle before Lindnord met him.

COLONIAL MINDS AND (SELF-)DECEPTION

The inconsistencies in the evolving Arthur stories are telling. Not only do they highlight the need for hyperbolic representations to make a story captivating for Hollywood, but they also expose the distorted lens through which the Global North views the Global South. For example, [Lindnord’s insistence](#) that the dog was on the brink of death, despite Barbuncho’s ability to follow them through extraordinarily challenging terrain for days, underlines a subconscious narrative of deprivation and suffering stereotypically associated with the Global South. This narrative is advanced further when Lindnord paints the entire region with a broad brush, characterizing rural life as lacking any essential value for animals’ lives. The entrenchment of racist, colonial tropes grows increasingly clear as Lindnord reflects on [“how tough it must be to be a stray dog in this country, dependent on the kindness of strangers”](#) because [“some of the natives sure don’t show much kindness.”](#) And he employs age-old characterizations of rural people that dispossess and disenfranchise:

it has just never been part of the culture for some parts of Ecuador to regard animals with any respect. They are kicked, shouted at, beaten—people know that there are no laws to protect the rights of animals, and it is not a crime to mistreat them, so people mistreat animals and they let their children mistreat them.

For this reason, he expands the scope of his rescue to the whole culture: “Saving” isn’t just directed at the dog with “all the diseases,” but at saving all of the Arthurs of the world from unkind “natives” everywhere. Under the auspices of [The Arthur Foundation](#), which seems to no longer be active, Lindnord supported a carceral response with stricter punishment for animal abuse and mistreatment in Ecuador, with encouragement to implement similar laws the world over. Ideal pet-keeping in the Global North is governed by law; the well-being of an animal ensured by stable homes with fenced yards, regular medical surveillance, and enclosed quarantines and doggie daycares (upon leaving Ecuador, Barbuncho lived in quarantine for his first four months in Sweden).

But Lindnord is not the only one who appears to be caught in the hyperbole and colonial tropes. The publishing industry and Hollywood follow right along. Barbuncho’s 30-mile trip (as the crow flies) gets conflated with the team’s full journey “[over the course of ten days and 435 miles](#).” Or, as Mark Wahlberg reported recently on [The Late Show with Stephen Colbert](#), “this dog travels 500 miles” and “the racer is going to get disqualified from the race because of the dog, and the racer chooses the dog.” The Library of Congress subject heading for the book lists Brazil and Amazon River Region as keywords; in [videos](#), Lindnord references being stared at by Indians in the Amazon and borrowing their Inca canoes (Ecuador’s coast is not Amazonian, nor is it close to any Incas), and the movie has now been filmed in the Dominican Republic after a failed trial in Puerto Rico. Uproar among Ecuadorians about the setting and production of the film in the Dominican Republic prompted a (dubious) explanation on

social media, with [Lindnord attributing the choice to a need for COVID protocols while filming](#). But I would argue that distance from the actual home and specifics of Barbuncho’s life was necessary to sustain the deception of (and perhaps legally protect them from) “the true story.” The obfuscation of place underlines the fact that what is important is that the backdrop is tropical, untamed, and supposedly befitting a place with Natives with no civilized customs of caring toward animals. In all, the ambiguity of the context is fundamental; rural folk (or “Natives”) in Ecuador, Dominican Republic, or Puerto Rico serve merely as a foil through which the Global North touts its own heroics and success.

Ecuadorians themselves are not immune to these troubling colonial stereotypes. When Esteban was eventually found by the Ecuadorian press and acknowledged his ownership of Barbuncho, it prompted [national petitions](#) to jail him. These picked up steam primarily through urban elites from Quito and animal rights networks, providing a stage for the [social media backlash](#) against the whole of the rural interior. Barbuncho’s physical health—and the immediate acceptance that his health was a result of choice rather than structural conditions shared by his community—came to powerfully represent a more general anxiety that rural and coastal Afro-Ecuadorians and mestizos are holding the country back. The Ecuadorians who celebrated Lindnord’s cultured manner of pet-keeping did so to align themselves with a progressive notion of modernity, and they called out Esteban as a national embarrassment, [apologizing for their less-cultured country folk](#). Primitive representations were swapped for savage ones; Esteban and his kind became implicitly branded as backward, barbaric, and abusive.

DOGGIE DESIRES

For a little bit of self-deception, our reward is celebrating the loyalty and friendship between man and dog, especially when the story involves a dog so utterly determined to keep up with his “best friend.” What’s more, we deserve to feel good in

this difficult world of tough news cycles and polarizing debates. Dogs are the perfect object of salvation, allowing us to project our desires (and theirs) for uncomplicated companionship and loving relationships amid the challenges of late capitalism. Interesting, Lindnord and his enthusiasts counter any and all skepticism about the story by insisting that he didn’t choose the dog, “the dog chose us.” That should end the debate. [But, when asked what he would do if contacted by the dog’s owner, Lindnord insists, “I have microchipped Arthur. I am his owner.”](#)

In its deceptions, this “incredible true story” reveals a deeper truth. The story has such force because of the fun reward of a dog and feel-good heroics. But the legend of Arthur was left entirely unquestioned because it is based on a deeper, more incredible truth: a racist and colonial “common sense.” In this logic, rural backwardness and tropical savagery justify and amplify the North’s civility and natural claim to property. These stereotypes do more than just misinform; they entrench harmful, savior-type ideologies that validate the North’s interference in the South’s affairs. In stories like these, rural populations are denied agency, cast as villains, and their life is overly simplified, ignoring the complexities and structural roots of their experiences. In the end, it’s the heroism and the conquest that we really want to see, not the continual extraction and dispossession that make it all possible. It’s an age-old story. In the late capitalist Hollywood version, everyone who is important and visible stands to benefit: Lindnord, the dog, the film producers and cast, and the dog lovers of the world. The ultimate deceit, however, is that this win-win success depends on the moral and political disenfranchisement of Barbuncho’s people—his home, family, and community. 🌀

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Familiar Danger:

Human-Animal Conflict and the Expectation of Deception in Wayanad, Kerala

By Susan Haris

In Wayanad, a densely forested district in the state of Kerala, in South India, human-animal conflict is on the rise, with [frequent reports](#) of tigers preying on cattle, bears causing havoc, and elephants damaging property. Public sentiment is increasingly hostile toward the Forest Department, accusing them of prioritizing animal protection over human welfare due to the strict enforcement of the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972 in the state. Incidents with leopards, tigers, and elephants have been reported in the early months of 2024. One recent situation involves a 20-year-old elephant called [Belur Makhna](#), who crossed into Wayanad from Karnataka, the adjoining state, and [trampled a tractor driver](#), Panachiyil Ajeesh, to death. Some reports indicated that individuals were pelting the elephant with stones, prompting the elephant to charge at them. But it is not only humans who are harmed in these conflicts. On February 3, a 30-year-old elephant named Thanneer Komban, so-called for his affinity for breaking water pipes to drink cool water, died under [suspicious circumstances](#) following his capture and relocation after he entered a human settlement in Mananthavady. Concerns have arisen that the Karnataka Forest Department might be intentionally relocating their elephants to the Kerala border, leading to increased encounters with humans.

On February 17, a [protest](#) organized by an all-party action council in Pulpally, also in north Wayanad, turned violent when government officials and representatives didn't promise in writing to meet the protesters' demands. The protesters hurled stones and shouted at the police and the officials present, including legislators. Additionally, the protesters transported the carcass of a bull reportedly killed in a tiger attack near Pulpally that morning to the demonstration site, placing the body and a wreath on the hood of a Forest Department vehicle. How can we decode this collective resentment? Is it targeted toward the Forest Department's perceived de-prioritization of human interests, or is it toward the animals who pose a threat to human safety? If this anger is fueled by a sentiment of deception, assuming that "deception" refers to a calculated but hidden tactical action, then are animals unwittingly granted murderous intentions?

Anthropological research into human-animal conflict has centered on conservation efforts, tracing their roots to colonial times, examining their repercussions on marginalized communities, and analyzing the development of antagonistic sentiments toward wildlife. Conservation scientists and ecologists often describe the sentiments as "[negative attitudes](#)," including fear, resentment, and anger toward wild animals. The accompanying sense of powerlessness and low tolerance may



ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/FREDER

culminate in retaliatory killings of wildlife as a means of addressing or venting the frustrations arising from human-animal conflict. Negative attitudes can also lead to the stigmatization of certain animal species, further exacerbating conflict and hindering conservation efforts. They can strain relationships between local communities and conservation organizations and the Forest Department, impeding collaborative efforts to find sustainable solutions to human-animal conflicts.

Though I have been conducting fieldwork in Wayanad since 2019, I have observed an emerging sentiment of perceived deception among the public more acutely in the last two or three years. Expectations of deception have taken on myriad forms, though primarily stemmed from the lack of transparency from the Forest Department, coupled with the belief that the department and wildlife authorities were colluding to mislead the public about the true “facts”

about wildlife. In India, the management, conservation, and protection of forests and wildlife fall under the jurisdiction of the Forest Department, operating at both the national and state levels. The historical interactions between department authorities and local communities have contributed to a lack of trust or skepticism toward official narratives. The department’s unwillingness to share information about tigers or elephants led to conspiracy theories about hidden agendas or manipulative tactics.

There was a widespread belief that both elephant and tiger populations had increased, accompanied by an expansion of forest cover, ultimately favoring wildlife over human interests. A portion of the population believes that state and forest authorities have lied to the public about animals being endangered at all. Another popular belief is that the Forest Department was lackadaisical about these attacks to encourage people to leave, which would result in an increase in forest cover. In short, deception came to life through prevailing societal beliefs and social understandings in Wayanad. Expectations of deception emerge as an affective response, based on the beliefs and social un-

derstandings in Wayanad that government agencies and wildlife authorities may engage in acts of concealment, misinformation, or manipulation regarding the management, outcomes, or causes of human-animal conflict.

When I first visited a site in Choorimala where a calf had been killed by a tiger, I expected the scene to resemble a gathering after a person’s death. The calf’s body lay exposed near the cattle shed, and everyone took pictures. Various parties, including media, forest officers, the farmer’s relatives, and party officials gradually arrived to investigate the incident and converse with the farmer to learn the details. The farmer recounted the same narrative to different individuals, who speculated on why the tiger might have chosen that particular location. Soon, people began offering explanations for the specific cattle killed and the increasing human-animal conflicts in Wayanad. These explanations were similar to those offered in structured live debates organized by local news channels on human-animal conflict, as they often presented rehearsed and complex views on the subject rather than addressing a partic-



ular incident. The debates often featured local activists urging the government to heed the pleas of the public living in fear.

The explanations and speculations about animal killings in India revealed that wildlife was unwelcome. The explanations not only make immediate sense of the violent incident but also predict what the government is going to do, or not do. I first got a taste of the portentous nature of these explanations when an onlooker, a distant neighbor who had arrived to commiserate, offered his theory: “The government is going to do nothing. Why don’t they shoot the tiger? They have an understanding with the Karnataka government. When there is an issue here, they will drop the tiger in Karnataka and when there is an issue there, they drop him back. The tigers get free trips while the people suffer.” These theories are based on some truth, as tigers are caught and relocated as the [National Tiger Conservation Authority \(NTCA\) protocol](#) stipulates that a tiger can be shot only after it has been confirmed to have killed a human.

In their appeal to truth, these theories bear similarities to rumors. [According to Veena Das](#), rumors lack a signature, yet they render the imaginary real and can contribute to actual violence, erasing the humanity and subjectivity of the Other. The violence thus generated “becomes so embedded in the fabric of the social that it becomes indistinguishable from the social.” This expectation of deception also functions as a call to action and occasionally for violence. The most common demand when tigers and elephants enter human-dominated areas is for their relocation, but when cattle or a human is killed, the public demands that the wild animal be shot. This fear and panic are fueled by the expectation of deception and exacerbated by unverified WhatsApp messages and undated videos depicting animal encounters.

To allay this perceived deception, organizations like the Kerala Independent Farmers Association (KIFA) employed several tactics. They installed their own camera traps and sought the assistance of experts to identify tigers captured on camera, cross-referencing these images with the NTCA repository. In the event of a cattle kill, KIFA leaders provided locals with the mobile numbers of the chief wildlife warden. Although they claimed to oppose the killing of wild animals, their approach, which highlighted human suffering overlooked by the government, suggested a need for stricter measures against wildlife. KIFA members juxtaposed the Kerala Forest Department’s perceived weak actions with those of Western nations unafraid to practice culling. In response to the department’s alleged deception, KIFA positioned themselves as advocates for farmers, as reflected in their slogan: *kaattil mathi kaattu neethi* (let the law of the jungle remain in the jungle).

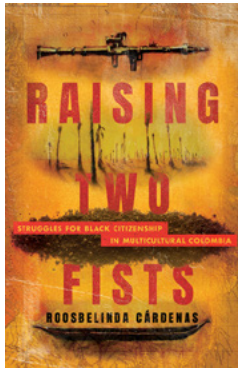
Human-animal conflict is unsettling due to its unpredictability and its breakdown of the boundaries between “civilization” and “wilderness”—one does not expect to see a [bear running](#) through town. How else can one make sense of a wild animal suddenly in their midst? How do they explain the intense fear? By attributing deception to the government, the surreal suddenly takes shape. The expectation of deception becomes a means to process reality and aspire to a comprehensive understanding of events involving animals. The belief that the state is deceiving them allows the public to construct a reality in which the state apparatus is in control, thereby excluding animals and deferring the question of animal intentionality. Thus, we do not have to think of questions like, Did the elephant attack because it was angry? Did humans provoke the elephant in some way?



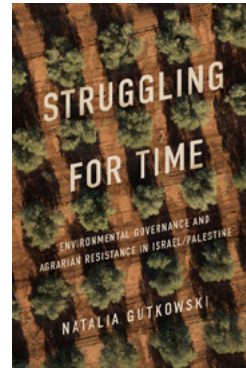
At the same time, since the Forest Department is tasked with protecting wild animals and conservation, the transposition pits the vulnerable public against the dangerous animal and the deceptive department, effectively conflating the Forest Department with the wildlife. This underscores the inefficacy of governments and departments while reinforcing the public’s inclination to have wildlife confined to forested areas. In other words, the unsettling question of whether animals intended to harm humans or if the animals were provoked or angry is postponed or transformed, as addressing such questions only intensifies uncertainties surrounding every human-animal conflict. Such questions would force us to confront animal intentions and to take seriously why and how we have transformed shared human-animal landscapes in the Anthropocene.

Deception has long been intertwined with human-animal relations, particularly in the context of hunting. In order to successfully hunt animals for food or other resources, humans have historically employed various deceptive tactics, camouflaging themselves to blend into the environment, imitating animal calls to lure prey closer, and setting traps or snares disguised to appear innocuous to unsuspecting animals. Animals have also been known to employ deceptive tactics in their interactions with humans, even though these are usually seen as adaptive strategies that enhance their survival and reproductive success in their respective environments. Could it be that we do not want to think animals can deceive us? Is that why we expect the government to deceive us? This expectation of deception is a prophecy. As human-animal conflicts continue to increase in Wayanad, each encounter muddies reality and erodes trust. Animals are assigned blame, but it is the Forest Department that is rendered capable of deception. 🌀

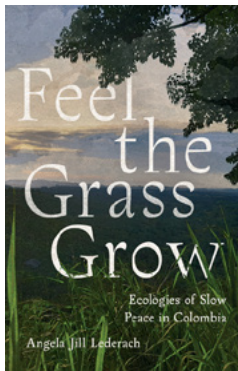
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Raising Two Fists
*Struggles for Black
Citizenship in
Multicultural Colombia*
Roosbelinda Cárdenas



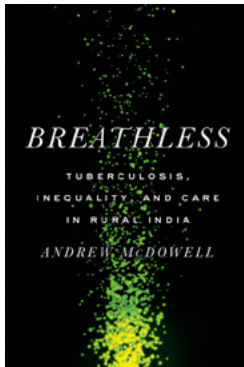
Struggling for Time
*Environmental Governance
and Agrarian Resistance in
Israel/Palestine*
Natalia Gutkowski



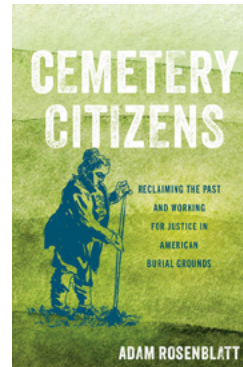
Feel the Grass Grow
*Ecologies of Slow Peace in
Colombia*
Angela Jill Lederach



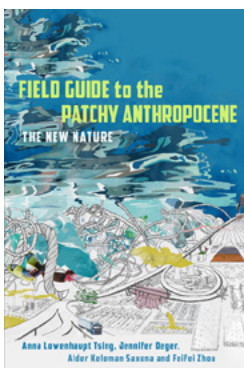
Trapped
*Life under Security
Capitalism and How to
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Mark Maguire and
Setha Low



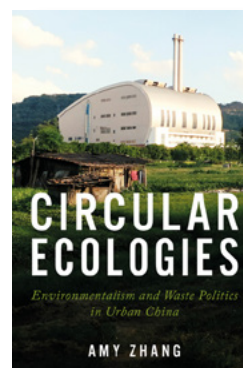
Breathless
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Andrew McDowell
SOUTH ASIA IN MOTION



Cemetery Citizens
*Reclaiming the Past and
Working for Justice in
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Adam Rosenblatt



**Field Guide to the
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Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing,
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Alder Keleman Saxena,
and Feifei Zhou



Circular Ecologies
*Environmentalism
and Waste Politics in
Urban China*
Amy Zhang



The Semi-Conductor Radio Made in Shanghai

By Skylar Hou

(In Mongolian)

The semi-conductor radio made in Shanghai,
Is a gift awarded to me.
Because I do a good job at work,
And it is this radio that encourages me.

When I am out grazing,
It is singing in my hand.
When I am sitting in my yurt,
It is speaking on my cabinet.

(In Mandarin Chinese)

The semi-conductor radio made in Shanghai,
It is shyly lying in the corner.
Ai—what are you singing?
Accompany me day and night.

It is my beloved friend.
It is the gift of hard work.
Ai—what are you singing?
It brings me encouragement and tenderness.

(In Mongolian)

My yellow-and-white-cased radio,
It is a talkative gem.
My red heart towards the revolution,
I use it (the radio) to sharpen.

This radio was gifted to me,
It is nice to hear it anytime, anywhere.
In my ears,
Beijing sounds so good

I arrived at a cramped classroom tucked away at the end of the hallway of a community center in Inner Mongolia, China. There were ten students and Teacher Tuya, all in their late 50s or 60s, who were part of a Mongolian-language learning initiative. Bonded by their shared experiences of never having had the opportunity to learn their heritage language, they come together every day to take beginner-level Mongolian classes and sing Mongolian songs. They were also rehearsing for a performance of *The Semi-Conductor Radio Made in Shanghai*, a show designed to showcase Mongolian culture to tourists from across the country.

With the music, the ensemble rose from their seats, a few of them adjusting their reading glasses to better read the notes. Amid it all, one student enthusiastically weaved through the crowd, an iPhone in hand, documenting the rehearsal. Others held their smartphones in the air, trying to get a better audio recording for later practices. In this moment, I was struck by a scene both fascinating and confusing: a group of urban, middle-class Mongolian Chinese elderlies, equipped with the latest technologies, singing and performing as Mongolian nomads, celebrating the joy of their newfound connection to the modern world and to the state center, all through a radio made in Shanghai.

This story follows the experiences of these performers and their audience. In their pursuit to share what they believe

to be the truth of their people's past, the performers poured their hearts into the performances. However, without their knowledge, their earnest efforts unintentionally created a narrative that diverged from the reality understood by their audience. This is a story where deception rears its head by accident, as everyone imagines their own version of truth.

PERFORMANCE DAY

As the performers took the stage, the floor-to-ceiling digital screens behind them transformed into Inner Mongolia's landscape: under a serene blue sky dotted with fluffy white clouds, vast expanses of green grasslands stretched as far as the eye could see. In the distance, clusters of white yurts dotted the landscape, while scattered herds peacefully grazed. To enhance im-



"Rehearsal." FIELDWORK SKETCH BY SKYLAR HOU. SUMMER, 2023.

mersive experience, the performers wore beautiful traditional Mongolian robes, which they rented from an online costume shop. Their carefully choreographed dance moves synchronized with the imagery, as they swayed their bodies back and forth with hands clasped in front, mimicking the gesture of holding the reins of galloping horses as they started to sing. Collectively, these curated practices on stage wove a compelling [time-space](#) experience, a representation of nomadic Mongolian lifestyles designed to transport audiences in time and space to another point in history. This temporal-spatial backdrop harmonized seamlessly with the lyrical narratives of the song, framing the first-person narrative of "I" within a specific time and space of grazing and living in yurts. Furthermore, beyond merely establishing the context, this performance positioned the bodies of the singers within the narrative. In doing so, it embodied the essence of Mongolian identity.

INNER MONGOLIA THEN AND NOW

The differences between the rehearsal setting and the presentation on stage highlight the unmistakably urban lifestyle of these singers, which raises the question

of why they would select a song celebrating an object so removed from their personal experiences. The bustling city backdrop and their high proficiencies with technology sharply juxtapose with the pastoral imagery of grazing and yurt and the joy over sounds of radios. How do the images and ideas surrounding such an impersonal, distant event manage to remain relevant for these performers?

For the performers, the time, space, and personhood presented on stage hold significance because they believe the performance is a reenactment of what they imagined to be historically accurate. Teacher Tuyaa, along with many other people at the Light School, liked to tell me stories of the past. "Back then," they reminisced, "a semi-conductor was all there was!" However, when I asked whether they had *personally* experienced any event or emotions similar to what was depicted in the song, they admitted they were too young to recollect. In fact, most of them had never lived the lifestyle portrayed in their performances.

During their childhood, much of their generation was relocated to state-owned residences, and they grew up in the city. Consequently, these performers are

reenacting what they have been told to be historical truths based on narratives from their parents and grandparents. The version of the past they constructed in their performance is based on their imagination rather than personal recollections. The song and the performance serve as a canvas for their imagining, allowing them to piece together elements they perceive as fitting to what the past might have looked like, construct a coherent time-space they put on stage. As Parmentier suggests, these performers use this communicative performance to act as a sign "[of and in](#)" [history](#), where they articulate and produce what they consider *as* history and enact it as history to others.

Although the performers never experienced the event depicted in the song they firmly believe that its symbolic meanings—the social positioning it presents between themselves and the nation, as well as the emotions it carries—remain relevant in their personal lives. They perceive the performance as a celebration of the progress and development that the nation has brought to their community. "We show people that now is a great time to be us," as they often say to justify their choice of singing this song from the 1960s.

When they performed the event of receiving a semi-conductor radio to hear the sounds of Beijing, they construct a time-space as a lens through which to rationalize the present state. By contrasting the past and present, they show appreciation for the transformations that have occurred over time, highlighting that their current reality is a continuation of that historical moment when the radio was initially celebrated.

[Lempert and Perrino](#) argue that time, space, and personhood are configured in a meaningful whole. The performers intentionally constructed this time-space through the song, which draws a clear boundary between their current reality and what they see as the past. This construction was also intentionally dialogic, presenting a contrast to their own realities to celebrate progress and development as a national project. Unfortunately, slippage occurs in their endeavor in communicating through the performance.

POST-PERFORMANCE

The performance that day was before an audience of tourists from different parts of the country, most of whom had limited knowledge about the present circumstances in Inner Mongolia. At the end of the performance, many friendly tourists approached the stage, shaking hands with the performers and inquiring enthusiastically about the lives as portrayed in the song. *Do you still live in a yurt? How many sheep do you own? Have you visited other parts of the country?* These interactions left both the performers (who grew up in an urban setting) and the audience confused and uncomfortable. This phenomenon is what [Webb Keane describes as the “slippage”](#) in communicative events, where the intended meanings are distorted and misunderstood during the process of reception and transmission. The meticulously constructed performance, intended by the performers as a reenactment of the past, became a deception of Mongolian’s current reality to the audience.



“Backstage.” FIELDWORK SKETCH BY SKYLAR HOU. SUMMER, 2023.

The performers, devoted to pursuing every aspect of authenticity within the construction of the time-space on the stage, diligently studied Mongolian lyrics and researched and invested in Mongolian traditional clothing and movements. They endeavored to transport the audience to their imagined past through attention to every detail. However, the more authentic and realistic the performance aimed to be, the further it deceived its audience. For the audience, unaware of the context of the song and merely partaking in ethnotourism, the performers’ assumptions underlying the performance were lost. Instead, the performance became the audience’s perceived reality of contemporary Mongolian Chinese life, prompting them to sincerely inquire about the yurts and sheep they assumed the performers own.

The tourists in the audience perceived the performers as embodying a distant place and lifestyle, inherently different and unknown from their own. These Mongolian performers’ actions actively shaped the audience’s perception of reality in Inner Mongolia, prompting outdated stereotypes about Mongolian people. Conversely, for the Mongolian performers, their portrayal was intended to be a representation of history, reflecting a time and place they deemed to be the authentic

past. It also depicted their understanding of causality, linking their present lives to progress and development facilitated by the state, symbolized by the receipt of a radio. This historic aspect of the narrative, as perceived by the Mongolian performers, was so clear that it did not require any clarification.

At the end of the story, two parallel realities were constructed and affirmed. The performers retreat to their tech-saturated, middle-class living realities in the city, with the satisfaction of having contributed to preserving community memories and historical narratives, while the audience departs awestruck by

their immersion in the nomadic Mongolian lifestyle, imagining that this is the reality that Mongolian people still live. This deception took place by accident, despite the genuine efforts of those engaged in communication to convey ideas and understand different realities. It began with the tourists, who assumed that Mongolian people must lead vastly different lives, while the Mongolian performers were oblivious to being Othered and romanticized. Meanwhile, the performers imagined a Mongolian past that could have been, yet their audience placed the performers themselves, along with their narratives, in a distant past. 🌀

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A township bar, Zimbabwe. JEREMY JONES

Airlock: Deception and the Circulation of Beer in Urban Zimbabwe

By Jeremy Jones

Airlock: When air enters a diesel fuel system, preventing proper combustion. Usually caused by an empty tank.

*Airlock*₂ [Zimbabwean slang]: When “gas” (alcohol) stops flowing, preventing a proper level of inebriation. Usually caused by empty pockets.

Most people have heard the lie, “I don’t have money.” Indeed, some of us have told it. It is not the sort of claim one takes at face value, though. Instead, it is generally understood to mean “I don’t have money for *this*,” or more pointedly, “I don’t have money for *you*.” In other words, when a person feigns being broke, norms concerning the propriety of circulation tend to overshadow norms of sincerity. In that sense, this petty lie offers a good vantage point for examining the parts of deception that turn less on truth-value than they do on the tangled circuits of words and things. They direct our attention to what we might call deception’s prepositions (lying *to* whom, *for* what ends, *by* what means, etc.). That, in turn, can help us link local conceptions of deceit to the social and economic contexts in which they are applied, contexts where logics of circulation are always front and center.



JEREMY JONES

A peri-urban bar, Zimbabwe.

The lie I'm interested in here concerns beer money in Zimbabwe, and what happens when that money stops flowing consistently. The story begins in 2007, a time of extreme hardship for Zimbabweans. Early that year, after a decade of [political and economic turmoil](#), the country descended into one of the worst episodes of hyperinflation ever recorded. Holding terms constant, a local bus ride that cost about a hundred Zimdollars at the close of 2006—the equivalent of 50 US cents—cost thirty *sextillion* Zimdollars in January 2009. Strange as it was to deal in such figures, the real center of the hyperinflationary storm was not the zeros, but the pervasive shortages that accompanied them. Shortages, in turn, spawned elaborate hoarding schemes, frenzied efforts to cross the border, and a [ubiquitous black market](#). When a new government of national unity was formed in 2009, one of its first acts was replacing the Zimbabwe dollar with a US-dollar-based monetary system. Within months, the stores were full again.

Amid all of this, I carried out a series of discussions with a group of young men

living in a high-density township outside the Zimbabwean capital, Harare. They were lifelong acquaintances. In fact, many of their parents had worked together in a nearby industrial park in the 1970s and 1980s. Those industrial jobs had long since dried up, though, victims of the country's structural adjustment program, and the young men all made a living by combining minor hustles and shady dealings with skilled or semi-skilled piecemeal work.

At the start of each "talk show"—the term was theirs, plucked from TV—I would introduce a topic. It might be a common phrase or a subject pertinent to their lives, like the AIDS epidemic or fatherhood or the occult, but they did most of the talking and debating. Not surprisingly, the crisis was a constant part of the discussions, just as it was a constant presence in their everyday lives. More surprising, perhaps, was the fact that every talk show revolved around beer references and stories of beer-drinking. Beer—a term Zimbabweans use for every kind of alcohol—was obviously *implicated* in the crisis, since it was part of the wider econ-

omy of shortage. But it was also central to young men's *experience* of the crisis. And it was there, at the level of experience, that I encountered some new twists on a long-standing genre of deception.

Several talk shows in, we found ourselves in one participant's backyard, perched amid the rubble of an old shack. In front of us was a bucket of Chibuku, a mass-produced brand of "traditional" sorghum beer, which we drank from a communal cup as the conversation proceeded. On this occasion, I had deferred to their choice of topic: moral character. The conversation was held in the township lingua franca, ChiShona, but they alternated between the English term "character" and the vernacular term *hunhu*. *Hunhu*, in turn, is a first cousin to the [idea of ubuntu](#) in neighboring Nguni languages. But where the latter refers specifically to an African mode of humanness, centered on [conviviality and interdependence](#)—hence the famous Nguni phrase, "a person is a person because of other people" (*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*)—in ChiShona, *hunhu* can also

refer to a person's general character and comportment, even if they are bad.

I started the discussion by asking how character was related to common forms of illicit economic activity, like black market money-changing. That relationship had once been quite clear. Indeed, popular culture was replete with disapproving references to backroom deals, unscrupulous tricksters, and the dangers of urban scams and fakery. All emphasized that business should be carried out in a truthful, open manner, and that profits and spending should be linked to observable labor. My question was thus part of a [larger effort](#) to establish the limits of "licit" economic action in the context of the economic crisis. It did not lead where I expected, though.

After several minutes, "B-Boy," a voluble 28-year-old, gave the example of one of their shared acquaintances, who scored on a quick deal then blew the profits in spectacular style at the bar. Getting drunk was a worthy goal, in B-Boy's estimation, and the source of the money, if he knew it, did not warrant mention. Even the waste was understandable. "When we get some money," he explained, "it's our *culture* to go straight to the bar and spend it on *joy*." By "culture," he meant shared habits, rather than tradition, *per se*. "Joy," on the other hand, brought to mind beer, meat, and music ([it hinted at sex, too](#)). The problem, he said, was *who* enjoyed the windfall. Ideally, this sort of conspicuous consumption, a special variety of what Shona speakers term "shining" (*kushaina*), would result in a potlatch-style sharing of meat and beer—particularly prestigious kinds of beer, like bottled lager or spirits. But on this occasion, as often happened, the shining hadn't translated into sharing (or sharing with the right people).

Everyone agreed with B-Boy: that was bad *hunhu*. Sharing is base-level sociality for Zimbabweans. It is scrupulously cultivated in children, and it is more-or-less assumed in contexts of beer-drinking. In fact, the phrase "does he buy beer?" is often used to gauge a person's overall generosity. Shining, on the other hand, is an act that always risks being viewed as immoral,

precisely because showing off often contradicts the norm of sharing.

Shifting registers, though, B-Boy explained that someone who refused to share would likely sponge beer off his friends later, lying that he was broke. "You'll be buying him beer," he said, "then when you're out of money, he's nowhere to be found. He'll pretend that he left a long time ago, then come back later and keep buying *himself* beer." Put simply, stingy people and show-offs were inevitably liars, too: they would hide their money from view unless it served their own selfish ends.

After taking all of this in, Mandoza, the self-appointed host of the talk shows, suggested, with a devious glint in his eye, that they explore the topic further by dissecting *each other's* character. That sounded like a dangerous plan to me, and I said so. But I was overruled, and they gleefully set about the task. Tsotso, they said, drank alone (very bad), but would share his beer with anyone who happened to be around (good). B-Boy was too calculating when it came to beer purchases; he insisted that everyone share costs equally (killjoy!). Hussein was a fair-weather friend: whenever you had money for beer, he suddenly appeared, only to disappear when you were broke. Buju either hid his money entirely or channeled it to his many girlfriends. That, in turn, meant that he never bought beer for the "boys." As for Mandoza, everyone agreed that he loved shining. Most egregiously, he would stroll about the bar, swinging an expensive quart of lager, saying that his best white friend (me) had bought it for him (I hadn't, which is to say, he was lying about the source of his money).

Obviously, these and other character evaluations are a testament to the fact that they had grown up together and shared thousands of drinking episodes in common. But they also highlight beer's dual status in their lives: it both *made* social relations and offered a way to *think* about those relations. That double quality echoes the central claims of a [much larger literature on alcohol in Africa](#), including [Mary Douglas's classic concept of "integrated](#)

[drinking](#)." Note, however, that beer could ["unmake" relations](#) as much as it could make them, and it was invoked as evidence of social ills (like lying), not just social goods. In this talk show, for instance, even those evaluations of character that were not about deceit took it as a possibility to be managed.

Their basic challenge was managing different circuits of money; the lies were techniques for doing that. Shona-speakers often say that their money has a "program" or *chinangwa* (purpose/destination), by which they mean money set aside for particular ends. Among those ends are routine household expenses, children's school fees, contributions to wider kin networks and social groups, and capital stock for larger purchases or business expenses. In the ideal world of drinkers, one's income would be adequate to fund each of these "programs" while leaving a consistent stream of petty cash for consuming beer with friends. For most people, though, such a world has never existed, even in the colonial heyday of wage labor. Moreover, beer is a special commodity, and that means beer-drinking has never just been one monetary circuit among others. In fact, in popular culture, the paradigmatic form of the lie, "I don't have money," involves men hiding money from their *wives* and channeling it to "joy" instead. Song lyrics, TV dramas, novels, poems: all speak constantly to this image of moral dissipation. Such men are recognized as icons for the ills of urban colonial modernity: men "swallowed" by the beer-soaked life of towns, unable to convert their earnings into domestic reproduction and advancement.

In short, calculations about how, where, and to whom money should flow have always proved to be fertile ground for acts of deception and moral evaluation, especially when they involve beer. But Zimbabwe's hyperinflationary crisis multiplied the challenges young men like these faced. On one hand, it was widely argued that people had been "forced by the situation" to lie, cheat, and otherwise violate norms. More importantly here, the crisis also dissolved



JEREMY JONES

Worthless 50 billion Zimdollar notes discarded in the street, January 2009.

the barriers that people had long sought to establish between monetary circuits. With them went much of the criteria for evaluating truth and lie. For instance, later in the talk show, Hussein asked whether it was right to pay somebody's "cut" from a deal with beer instead of money. Keep in mind that such "cuts" were a crucial source of income at the time, and a key facet of the hyperinflationary economy in general. Say you borrowed bus fare from somebody to go to town for some hustle, he said, then came back and bought that person two fares' worth of beer. Was that okay? No, Mookie argued. Better to repay them in cash, plus ten percent. Beer should be "extra."

It was a good template for proper action, but it was constantly thwarted by reality. In fact, every transaction amid hyperinflation provided a unique scope for deceit. Since prices changed by the day, for example, it was not easy to establish what was profit and what was revolving capital, whereas it was simple to manipulate the timing, and thus the value of payment. At a more basic level, it became more difficult to establish whether beer drinking was about work or joy. When you channeled money to beer with friends, was it a business investment? In Hussein's scenario, it clearly was.

The post-2000 crisis in the country did not so much create lies, then, as sharpen the contradictions that produced and

structured them, while simultaneously fracturing the existing techniques for making sense of them. Accordingly, the situation is a potent, albeit unusual, reminder that it is only by examining how words and things circulate that *we* can make sense of lies. 🌀

Jeremy L. Jones is an associate professor of anthropology at College of the Holy Cross. His work on money, kinship, informal economies, and experiences of economic crisis draws on fieldwork in hyperinflationary and post-hyperinflation urban Zimbabwe. His current research concerns the intersection of money, governance, and alcohol.

Is There Something Fishy about the Polygraph?

By Hugh Gusterson

August 9, 2016, was a good day for Phil Heasley, [the CEO of a financial services company](#) in Florida. Fishing with his crew of three off the coast of Maryland from his 68-foot luxury yacht, *Kallianassa*, he caught a white marlin that was six feet long and weighed 76.5 pounds. Heasley was competing in Ocean City's annual White Marlin Open competition, the world's largest billfishing tournament. His was one of [1,389](#) white marlin caught during that year's competition, but was the only one to clear the 70-pound minimum that conferred eligibility for the prize. That meant that he got all the prize money—all \$2.8 million.

August 22, 2016, was a bad day for Phil Heasley. That was the day the organizers of the White Marlin Open informed him that he would not get the prize money after all—because he had failed a lie-detector test.

Fishing competitions are notorious for inciting cheating, and they can be hard to police directly. Hence the reliance on polygraph testing. In this case, more than 300 boats were competing over an area of several hundred square miles, and there were strict rules to follow: boats were not to leave the harbor before 4 a.m., not to put their lines in before 8:30 a.m., not to keep them in after 3:30 p.m., and not to fish more than 100 nautical miles from Ocean City, Maryland. And while a crew member could hook the fish, the registered fisher was to fight it alone—no easy task for a man in his 70s, as Heasley was. (This “hook and hand” rule was unusual: fishing tournaments usually stipulate that the same person must hook and fight the fish.)



Striped Marlin *Tetrapturus audax*: 114.6 kilograms.

Heasley and his crew members all failed the polygraph. *Kallianassa's* captain offered the memorable excuse that he failed because he had drunk so much and taken a lot of cocaine at a celebration the night before the polygraph test.

ROBERT ENGBERG

In May 2017, my research assistant Dana Burton and I sat through [a nine-day trial](#) at the US District Court in Baltimore, watching Phil Heasley challenge the validity of the polygraph test he had failed so as to reclaim the \$2.8 million snatched away from him. The expert witnesses included the president of the American Polygraph Association and the editor of *Polygraph*, the official journal of the [American Polygraph Association](#). They testified on opposite sides of the case.



The polygraph—the lie-detector machine—took shape in the 1920s and 1930s in the United States, where it had [three fathers](#). [John Larson](#), the first US police officer to also have a doctorate, worked for the Berkeley police department, where he had a reputation as a liberal reformer. He developed his lie-detection machine as an objective scientific replacement for the crude methods of violence and intimidation regularly used by police officers to extract confessions from those they “knew” to be guilty. The machine made its public debut in 1921, when he used it to investigate thefts at a Berkeley sorority. However, the thefts continued after the woman identified as the culprit left the sorority, and she would later recant her confession, attributing her suspicious physiological reactions during the test to a repressed history of sexual abuse. In later life, Larson would turn against his invention, calling it a “[Frankenstein’s monster](#).”

By then, however, Larson’s protégé, [Leonarde Keeler](#), had refined Larson’s invention (adding a roll of unfurling paper inscribed by mechanical pens as well as a capacity to measure perspiration) and energetically promoted it. He persuaded banks that it would help them identify employees who embezzled. He also worked for the US government, polygraphing German prisoners of war during World War II, as well as hundreds of employees of the top-secret uranium production facility at Oak Ridge, Tennessee.

William Moulton Marston, the most colorful of the polygraph’s co-inventors, developed a slightly different machine around the same time. He has recently come to popular attention thanks to a lurid but learned [biography](#) by Jill Lepore and a racy Hollywood [biopic](#). A feminist *avant la lettre*, he lived openly with two women, Elizabeth Holloway and Olive Byrne. He was also the creator of the cartoon character Wonder Woman, transmuting his frank appetite for bondage and domination into a key trope, the “lasso of truth,” in his cartoons. His advocacy for the polygraph backfired when he testified in defense of [James Frye](#), a Black man who had recanted a murder confession. Marston said the polygraph showed that Frye was telling the truth when he said he was innocent of murder. In what is widely recognized as one of the most important judicial decisions of the twentieth century, establishing what became known as “the Frye standard,” the DC Court of Appeals ruled against Frye and Marston in 1923, saying, “while courts will go a long way in admitting expert testimony deduced from a well-recognized scientific principle or discovery, the thing from which the deduction is made must be sufficiently established to have gained general acceptance in the

particular field in which it belongs.” Since then, with certain limited exceptions, polygraph evidence has been banned in US courts.

The polygraph prospered despite the Frye setback, however. By the mid-1980s, two million Americans a year were being polygraphed, and a quarter of US private companies were using the polygraph to assess the honesty of their employees. The legal landscape changed in 1988 when the US Congress passed [the Employee Polygraph Protection Act](#), forbidding the use of polygraph tests by private employers. However, polygraphers soon adapted, and there is plenty of work for them today. Currently, federal employees of the CIA, the DIA, the FBI, the NSA, and the nuclear weapons laboratories are regularly polygraphed; sex offenders often submit to frequent polygraphs as a condition of parole; and most police departments use polygraphers to screen potential recruits for past wrongdoing and to obtain confessions from criminal suspects. (The ban on polygraph evidence in court is easily circumvented: confessions are entered as evidence with no mention of the polygraph tests that produced them.) Meanwhile, private polygraphers, who do not require a license in some states, do contract work for police departments, offer [marital fidelity testing](#), and are called in to adjudicate fishing contests.



I decided the best way to understand the polygraph was to become a certified polygrapher. For ten weeks, I spent nine hours a day, six days a week in a windowless polygraph training facility. My seven classmates were almost all police officers, two of them from Malaysia. My instructors, led by a former US Army interrogator, included a former FBI agent, police officers, and private polygraphers. We spent the mornings being lectured on various aspects of polygraphy and the afternoons practicing on one another. By the end of the ten weeks, I had been polygraphed about 60 times and had administered roughly 60 polygraph tests to my classmates. The class was harder work than any class I ever took at a university. I later took an advanced one-week class at a different polygraph school to get certified in the art of polygraphing sex offenders. In all honesty, I was the least competent student in either class, but I now have a framed certificate on my wall letting the world know that I am a qualified polygrapher.

We began basic training by mastering the hardware. We learned how to gracefully fasten pneumatic tubes around a subject’s upper and lower chest to monitor their breathing, to wrap a blood pressure cuff around their upper arm (or sometimes the ankle) to record their heart rate, and to attach galvanometers to fingers to track changes in sweat response. These measuring devices are all plugged into a switchboard, which, in turn, is plugged into the examiner’s laptop, feeding it a constant graphic flow of bodily measurements. We also learned about hardware and observational practices that help detect attempted countermeasures by test subjects. (For obvious reasons, I will not describe them here, though I will give the free advice that it is pointless to put antiperspirant on your fingertips before a polygraph exam).



HUGH GUSTERSON

The author's polygraph equipment ready for use.

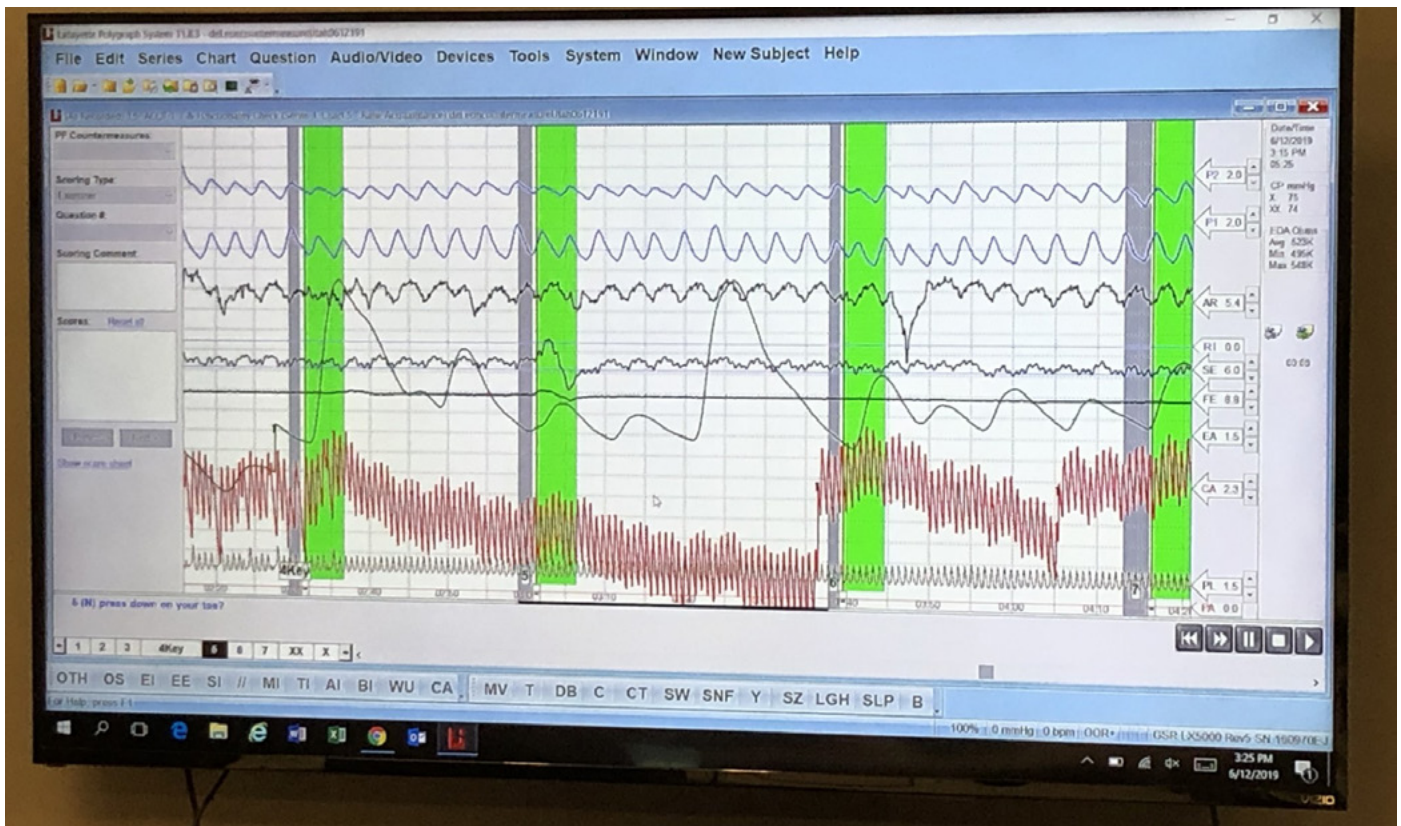
We then learned about question formats. “Screening tests” probe a subject’s past, while “diagnostic tests” investigate a particular event. The two kinds of tests require different questions, and the questions should be sequenced in particular ways. Some questions are designed to elicit what the polygrapher knows is a lie. Physiological responses to these questions provide a baseline—an image on a screen of that person’s individualized lie physiology—against which responses to other questions can be compared. Those questions, we were taught, must then be sharply focused. Less “did you assault your wife?” and more “did you punch your wife in the face on March 6?”

But we spent most of our time on the complexities of scoring. We learned about the different scoring schemes used by various government agencies and schools of polygraphy, and we were drilled day after day on the intricacies of turning the graphic chatter on our computer screens into objective numbers expressing the likelihood that our subject was lying. Our computer software

automatically generated these numbers for respiration, but we had to look closely at the wiggly lines on the screen to manually score sweat and heart rate with numbers that were then entered into a table. This involved strict rules for when a measurable response began and ended, and it often required the deployment of digital calipers to effect precise measurements. While my instructors scored polygraph tests with breezy efficiency, I struggled to apply the baroque scoring rules we were taught and dreaded having my scoring audited by classmates. To my annoyance, the Miami police officer who had never been to college kept finding errors in this professor’s scoring.



On June 14, 2017, Justice Bennett released his 52-page judgment in the case of *White Marlin Open, Inc. v. Heasley*. It is a complex document. Bennett reviewed at some length circumstantial evi-



HUGH GUSTERSON

Polygraph readings.

dence from the *Kallianassas* written ship logs and engine records suggesting that its crew violated the rules by putting fishing lines in the water before 8:30 a.m. He reviewed expert testimony by the editor of *Polygraph* magazine that the polygraphers erred by giving a “diagnostic” rather than a “screening” test and concluded he was wrong. He came to the same conclusion about the same expert witness’s opinion that questions such as “Did you, yourself, violate any fishing rules on Tuesday, August 9, 2016?” were vaguely phrased and caused “undue mental processing” that might look like a lie on screen. (Who am I to disagree with the testimony of the president of the American Polygraph Association? But I myself thought the question, which requires the test subject to have internalized the rules as common sense, was confusing and should have been phrased, “did you put lines in the water before 8:30 a.m. on August 9?”) Then, sweeping aside the expert witness who testified that the polygraph is not scientifically reliable, the judge averred that a contract is a contract and Phil Heasley had signed a contract to abide by the results of a polygraph test when he paid \$30,000 to enter the contest.

In other words, the \$2.8 million was the catch that got away from Phil Heasley.

Responding to the judgment with anger, Phil Heasley [said](#), “I am not the kind of person to lay down and let anyone run over us with

lies and junk science.” He appealed the decision to the appellate court—and lost there too.

Leonarde Keeler, imagining the replacement of juries by polygraphers, once [said](#), “Someday I can picture a medical legal committee with no judges, no lawyers in particular, but instead some scientific experts who will examine suspects and render a decision as to their guilt and opinions of their personality. Such well-trained men can better judge the reactions and social possibilities of a man than a haphazard group of businessmen and lawyers.”

The utopian dream of the polygraph is to afford certainty in the face of deception, to make lies transparent. In this case, which featured the leading polygraphers in the land testifying against one another, the polygraph in many ways just deepened the mystery. 🌀

The author wishes to acknowledge Dana Burton, who helped collect some of the information in this article and provided editorial feedback on the first draft.

Hugh Gusterson is professor of anthropology at the University of British Columbia. A past president of the American Ethnological Society, he has written books on the culture of nuclear weapons scientists, drone warfare, militarization, and algorithmic governance.

The Deceptive Echoes of Meta

Transitioned from man to machine,
Life's ease is fueled by our greed.
Lands abandoned, Meta embraced,
Social beings to mere ITs effaced.

Culture and traditions, left behind,
Modernity in mechanic binds.
AI arrives with promises anew,
Together we'll progress, they coo.

Pause, reflect on the progress scheme,
Stripped of the ability to dream.
Deception woven into reality's web,
Trapped as they seduce, their narrative ebb.

Dreams of kinship in a shared endeavor,
Yet reality's mockery lasts forever.
Hierarchies form, equality proclaimed,
But what of those with no connections named?

No internet, just flickering light,
Broken roads, constitution out of sight.
Panch's decision in the farthest lands,
Nature thrives behind Meta's demands.

Tech elite sits on their lofty wall,
Screams for equality, laughs in the thrall.
A pulse beats for those in the farthest lands,
Nature's rhythm beyond Meta's commands.

AI claims equality, a dubious illusion,
Inclusion sought, but a distant fusion.
Rights, humanity, and the tech facade,
Echoes in the silence, a distant applaud.

Debate equality, another time's call,
For now, inclusion—let it befall. 🌀

Maryam Riasat is a social sciences of health graduate who combines a fervor for writing and research, exploring the intricate intersections of health and humanity and crafting narratives that bridge academia and the broader world.



Transitory Facades: Architectures of the Middle-Somewhere

The Palace, as encountered from the car, alongside the highway, on the way from the small town of Sangareddy toward the metropolis of Hyderabad. SEEMA KRISHNAKUMAR

By Neelakantan Keshavan, Seema Krishnakumar, and Rajkumar Bejjanki

Facades of buildings, like faces, can wear masks. They can masquerade as something they are not. Hotel: The Palace, situated on India's National Highway-65, between the big city of Hyderabad and the small town of Sangareddy, is both and neither of its named components. In the local parlance, a "hotel" is a place to eat, but not really a place to stay. In the south-central landscape of India, where ancient rocks are being eaten by the cement of urbanization, what sits along the highway as it cuts through the countryside has a strange hybrid feel. There are carts offering sugarcane juice and people selling fruit from their bikes alongside larger shops, tented "Himalayan" sexual health clinics, and corrugated metal scrap dealers (*kabaadiwalas*)—a veritable gallery of wares sitting right alongside vehicular traffic. In this environment, The Palace is also a hybrid: a cross between the quintessential highway *dhaba* and something more middle-class, but in this case, with palatial aspirations. Its broad menu is mirrored in its broad clientele, including travelers who would have avoided a more typical *dhaba*, packed with truck drivers on a break from their cross-country journeys.



SEEMA KRISHNAKUMAR

The Palace before opening for the day. Its large sign advertises its key offerings to drivers on the highway.

This hotel, like every other building, has a façade—but just one. Like a highway Sphinx, it has the body of a warehouse and a face smeared with the metaphorical makeup of many architectural styles in a medley that would trouble serious-minded architects. Yet, the “eyes” in the face of the building are downright middle-class Indian: aluminum-lashed, domestic residential sliding windows. It hides its interior by pure pastiche. But if we framed it in a certain way, “installed” in a show for certain artistic circles, it might also be high-order art, a social commentary of its own. As a multigenre architectural artifice capturing the changing landscape, why do we dismiss “remixes” like this as lacking design intention? Places like The Palace that emerge from this type of story are anything but generic; they are culturally authored, “graffitied” art. Should we think of them as ignorant of the norms, or irreverent?

The beige of the facade is controlled. The aspiration seems to be to play “safe” or play “upper class.” The first few times we drove past this production, we missed the screaming clarity that this building is just sheer façade. The windows on the second

floor are more like skylights and only allude to a window. In fact that’s true for the whole of the top floor. It does what an ornament would do: highlight the wearer. Thrown over the head like a crown, this virtual top floor points to the reality below, which is of an eating place, accessorized

by stations selling perfumes and play areas for children. As visual hook, it did deceive; we did notice the building when driving past. It’s only when we saw the warehouse body that its glaring disconnect with the face, smiling and with sliver shutter lashes, became apparent.



SEEMA KRISHNAKUMAR

The façade of The Palace adorns a basic warehouse; note the metal truss extension that has grown to accommodate space and shelter as it expanded to include new shops.



SEEMA KRISHNAKUMAR

Within the architectural community, while these were being critiqued for being pastiche, their creator, Hafeez Contractor, shot to fame in the 1990s among the big investors and real estate developers like Hiranandani.

Taking a cue from them, a close look at the image to the left shows similarly beige façade remixes from apartment towers at Hiranandani Gardens, in the prime and expensive real estate of Powai, Mumbai. While Hafeez's palatial facades adorn expensive homes, the façade affixed to The Palace is only transitory, offering the promise of temporary lingering in palatial settings, on the way home. Seen from the perspective of the stability of land and property, this place, at its core, seems uncommitted to remain for very long. Similarly, its commitment to making the place convincingly real is limited to the façade, hinging thus on the visitors to play along with the make-believe as if it were real.



SEEMA KRISHNAKUMAR

The black station for selling perfumes, with a patch of artificial lawn in the front. This opens only in the evening, and the smell of the various perfume testers wafts through the air. These are locally produced and sourced perfumes referred to as ittar, which are quite strong and different from the perfumes sold mostly by Western brands in the large shopping malls in the city.



AKANKSHA SINGH

The Palace from the rear, its warehouse body onto which is attached the palatial image.

As highlighted by philosopher of technology Paul Virilio, the speed of technological advancements seems to diminish depth. Speed alienates engagement from going deep, keeping it to the façade, to the surface. Ribbon development, used by planners as a developmental tool, but which also sprouts as unplanned malaise, is an illustration of what mobility does to the interfaces along the margins of



SEEMA KRISHNAKUMAR

The children’s play area referred to as the “fun zone” alongside The Palace.

urban geography. Acceleration, which is a spiraling increase in speed, suggests less time of contact and friction with things on the way. There is only time enough to notice the façade, which, due to the speed of encounter, is more signal than sign. The highway is truly, strictly only infrastructural: a bare surface that provides the least

friction possible to movement over very long distances. It is the speed that makes of the place a quickly readable image, a glimpse, that conveys the reassurance and promise of a decent stopping place. And that is quite a promise on the highway, a public infrastructure without any committed stopping places with clean toilets



SEEMA KRISHNAKUMAR

Children’s play areas are present in similar highway eating places that appeal to and project an image of a “family” place as opposed to more male-oriented eating places like dhabhas.

and trustworthy food. The Palace, with its deceptive name and façade, provides a reassuring mirage of a resting place on the highway desert.

During our ride back from sampling the evening ambiance and food, we were discussing The Palace as a transitory space, an image responding to the speed of the highway, when Qasimbhai, our driver, turned around and corrected us: The Palace was not just transitory, but was an evening destination for many families from the surrounding villages and even outer suburbs of the big city.

It was more than image, but an actual place to drive to in the evening, especially on weekends, family and all, for a full dining experience. It offered respite and a break from the peri-urban flow of everyday life, a deception made real by the performances of visiting, parking, and dining. In that sense, The Palace is a place with enough investment to continue existing only as a face, at least until it knows whether to grow a body or to vanish altogether because change would be rapid, progress would be swift, and development merciless in its 100 km/hr drive, forcing



The frontage before entering The Palace, where it provides a backdrop for dining, meeting, and hanging out.

places like these to emerge, settle, and become part of the land, or just pack up and flee. 🌀

Sincere thanks to Akanksha Singh, Industrial Design Center, Indian Institute of Technology Bombay, India, for her timely support, without which the comparative image from Mumbai could not have been included in this article.

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Seema Krishnakumar has more than a decade of experience as a visual communicator, documentary photographer, and design faculty. Her research interests delve into the contemporary socio-cultural-political landscape through the language of visual medium. She is currently an assistant professor affiliated to the Department of Design, IIT Hyderabad.

Rajkumar Bejjanki, a professional fine artist, animator, multidisciplinary designer, calligrapher, and handwriting trainer with several years of experience in crafting compelling multimedia narratives, is currently with the Department of Design at IIT, Hyderabad. His aspirational focus is on designing interactive communications for social change and connecting communities.



The Palace at its most alluring, at night, from the highway.

On Police, Criminals, and the Anthropological Games They Play

By David Sausdal

Many crimes build on the ability to blend into the scenery of everyday life—to become part of people’s regular routines, but with clandestine intentions. “Criminals,” in other words, often have an impressive anthropological capability. They are not just good at stealing stuff or cheating people. To commit a crime, they must first have a detailed understanding of the way people behave and live. They must know not only different cultural codes and conduct but also, and especially, those of their potential victims.

Criminals’ ability to emulate conventional living and take advantage is perhaps best portrayed in David W. Maurer’s old descriptions of [pickpockets](#) and [con artists](#). Pickpockets, Maurer demonstrates, have stunning insights into how people act, knowing from tiny tells who a potential target might be and why someone who seems like the perfect victim really isn’t. As Goffman might have put it, the pickpocket “[scans](#)” crowds like Google scans the internet—quickly, almost imperceptibly. Con artists are much the same. They understand people. They know our dreams. They get us to place our confidence in them. And they prey on it.

But police, too, profit from having a kind of nonacademic yet no less effective anthropological knowledge about the

world they observe. The undercover cop or an officer on a stakeout needs to blend in, to go by unnoticed, not merely by hiding in a corner but by shrouding themselves in the flows of routine living. And just as the criminal needs to be able to unveil the camouflaged officer, the officer must be able to read the small signs that give away the criminal in the crowd.

It’s a game of trickery. A racket of deception in a sea of almost unnoticeable cues. This much [I know from having studied detective work and police stakeouts](#) for more than a decade—a game of anthropological double-dealing, so to speak. Hence, when the game is afoot, one must remain ever vigilant, as clues can come from the most surprising directions.

THE START

It’s 5 a.m. I’m dead tired. And so are the detectives. Yesterday, we spent the entire day searching for credit card thieves in downtown Copenhagen, Denmark. No luck, though. Although the [numbers of thefts](#) indicate that there are many to be found, locating them isn’t as easy as it may sound. Professional thieves from countries such as Romania, Poland, and Bulgaria, as well as Morocco and Chile, roam the streets of Copenhagen and many other European cities. Many [reports](#) have established this. But yesterday we came up emptyhanded. Again.

After a few hours of sleep, we are back at it. Drinking coffee like fiends, we slowly come to life. “It has to be like this,” Detective Andersen explains to me and his four colleagues, who all belong to a specialized unit within the Copenhagen Police district. “We know there are many thieves in town right now and that they are especially active during morning rush hour. So we also must be ready, right?” I nod. I have been with this unit for months now. It makes sense.

We exit the station and enter the streets. The detectives all wear their own private clothes. They have selected their outfits to make themselves as inconspicuous as possible. Jeans or cargo pants. A black or grey hoodie. Trainers. Clothes many people sport in Denmark and on the streets of Copenhagen. It’s a convincing look. The main

giveaway is that the detectives are required to wear their police gear underneath their camouflaging covers (weapons, vests, cuffs, radio, etc.). They hate it. All this extra gear makes it more difficult to blend in. “We would prefer wearing nothing but a short-sleeve shirt,” they say. But there’s nothing they can do about it. “Orders, you know.”

THE STAKEOUT

This morning, we go to Copenhagen Central Station—a known hub for slick thieves looking to relieve you of your pin and credit card. We split into two groups but keep in contact over the radio. A few words and commands are exchanged alongside the usual police banter. An attractive woman never goes by unnoticed. The radio scatters compliments. Always.

For an hour or so, we browse. We circle the station and its many shops and go up and down escalators, trying to look like any other traveler. Every now and then, the detectives spot someone of interest. A Polish-looking male. A couple of North African-looking youths. A nondescript guy seemingly hiding in the corner next to a coffee shop. But they decide against it. Some things fit, but the conclusion is that they are not the credit card crooks that the detectives are paid to apprehend.

Suddenly, they do see something. Or someone, that is. A spotlight is on a group of Eastern European-looking males. Possibly Polish. Detective Clausen points me in their direction. “Look over there. You see that guy who’s standing in line to buy a ticket. And now look at these other two men some 5–10 meters to his right. They are together. They are thieves. It’s 100 percent certain.”

THE SHOES

I locate the man in the queue. At first, he looks like any other person. He’s 40 or 50 years old, give or take. He has a haircut with a touch of old age and a mustache that any reasonably priced barbershop could produce. The man wears glasses, nonfitted blue jeans, and a beige blazer. “Look,” Detective Clausen urges. “Look at



Copenhagen Central Station.

his shoes. You see. They’re a bit off, no? No one in Denmark wears those. Those are Eastern European shoes. And look at the bag. Together with this blazer, jeans, and glasses, it is meant to produce the image of a traveling businessman or something like that, but the truth is that in his bag you will only find a hat, a phone, a bit of clothes, and perhaps a wad of cash that he and his friends have already stolen. . . . The hat they use to hide their faces when they take out money from the cards they’ve stolen.”

True. As I think about the hours upon hours of CCTV footage I’ve seen, the culprits almost always wear a hat and glasses to make their faces harder to recognize.

THE ACT

“And it’s not just about clothes,” Detective Clausen continues. “Nor is it—because I know what you think—only about his ethnicity.” These things matter, of course. They are part of the profile. But what really sticks out is the way he acts. Or, rather, the way he and the others *don’t* act. Give it a couple of seconds, and you’ll see what I mean.”

I look again. The guy slightly repositions himself, moving a bit to the right as he approaches the front of the queue. “There! You saw it, right? That tiny move gave him the angle he needed to track the way the

person in front of him pushes in her pin. He probably can’t see the actual tapping of the keys. But these guys are so skilled, that they can tell from the way your underarm and hand moves. It’s pretty amazing, to be honest. Now look again. See what happens.” I glance toward the guy, yet try not to look *too* hard as to give us away. As the woman who had just purchased the ticket leaves, the man goes to the machine, stands for a few seconds, but then leaves without buying anything.

“That’s the act, the MO. That’s how you tell.” Detective Pedersen states, adding to the conversation. “While you and I and any other person who is here at the train station, or any other location for that matter, act according to the rules of the place, these guys only mimic it. They wear the clothes, and they look the part. They pretend to be on their way, to be buying a ticket or to be window shopping, but what they are actually doing is scoping out their next victim *through* the window. 99 percent looks just perfect, but these small cues tell us that they are not here to travel but to steal.”

THE ARREST

As the man who had pretended to be buying a ticket leaves, we follow him. “Not too fast, though,” Detective Pedersen warns.

“What we need now is to mind the two others. This is how they work, you know. You might think they are alone, but they are almost always working in teams. They never walk close together all three or four. They spread out. Keeping an eye out for us as we are keeping an eye out for them. So if we for example follow this guy too obviously, the others will notice. So what we do is allow them to feel at ease and observe their next move. And then we pounce!”

And so they did.

The detectives arrested the three men and found more than \$8,000 (55,000 Danish kroner) in their bags, even though they could see that the men had only flown in from Poland that very morning. Stealing bank cards is a fast and lucrative business.

THE STORY

What is the story I’m trying to tell, then? What does this day—and many others—spent covertly chasing professional thieves teach us?

Obviously, it shows what Maurer and [others](#) have already finely portrayed. It bears witness to how criminal activity—although illegal and often immoral—isn’t just a simple matter of malice and brutality. Criminality is not just about being “[Other](#),” even though thoughts about ontological alterity have increasingly become a mainstay in today’s criminal policy and public discourse. Neither is it merely about shifty transgressions, finding loopholes and weaknesses and exploiting them. These aspects do of course belong to the criminal enterprise, at least in some measure, but what this story shows us is that deception binds the unlawful and the lawful, the irregular and the regular. We simply mustn’t underestimate the criminal ability to weave itself into the fabric of normal, everyday life and to use this ability as a deceptive cloak—nor the ability of law enforcement to deploy deception as part of their search for criminals.

Although crime is upsetting, for a criminologically interested anthropologist like myself, there is something deeply fascinating about the criminal ability to analyze cultures. To think that

(would-be) criminals are all just opportunistic brutes is to grossly underestimate the work and skills they put into their exploits. A capable police officer knows this. The more professional criminals study the places they go. They often know how we look, how we move, how we react to things, and how social life is supposed to be carried out in different places, online and offline.

It rings a bell, doesn’t it?

THE DISCRIMINATION

Much the same can be said for the police detective. In a day and age where we commonly discuss the discriminatory aspects of police work, racial profiling is a frequent culprit. It makes sense, especially in the United States, where racist and violent policing might be more prevalent and entrenched than in Denmark.

But what my many years of studying policing and detective work not just in Denmark but in different European contexts have shown me is that the illegitimate type of [racial profiling](#) we so heatedly (and rightly) discuss is often committed by the officers who take not too much but [too little interest](#) in the people they are trying to catch. What made the specialized unit of Copenhagen detectives special was their ability not to forget about race and ethnicity but to look beyond it—to add to it more than just disregard it (or let it pass by as an unconscious bias). They noticed the “Polishness” of a potential suspect. But what made the Poles in our story really interesting was not their ethnicity as such. The detectives did identify the Polish signifiers in potential suspects, it’s true. But they didn’t confine them to an ethnic cage. Rather, ethnicity was just a piece of the puzzle. More intriguing were the discreet nuances—the specific clothes donned, the unconventional choice of shoes, and most crucially, the conspicuous imitation, not genuine integration, into the interactionist rules of the train station. The detectives, in other words, saw the criminals’ game, not just their ethnicity—an ability many

other police colleagues don’t necessarily have as they become too obsessed with appearance rather than the broader anthropological clues.

THE ANTHROPOLOGIST

And what about the anthropologist, then? In my case, I had to face an uncomfortable truth. Despite years of fieldwork and a decent moral compass (I hope), my perception was not as sharp as I’d thought. My observations were often clouded by preconceived notions and stereotypes, rather than being based on the subtle behavioral cues the detectives sought to teach me. They sometimes joked that I did more racial profiling than they ever did, underpinning the degree to which my academic training fell short in this real-life context.

This realization was an embarrassment, yet it was also a valuable lesson. More than once, I ruined detective stakeouts as groups of thieves outed me. I was the proverbial elephant in this cat-and-mouse game of policing and crime. I found it hard to fake it and fall into the rhythm of a train station, a square, or a shopping mall. I stared at suspects rather than just glancing their way. I might be proficient in writing about these themes, even bringing seemingly scholarly elegance to the narrative. But when it came to practicing this kind of clandestine anthropology of the streets, I was at a loss.

It’s policing. It’s crime. It’s deception. And often a matter of darkness. Yes. But what continues to fascinate me is the way that both crime and policing also necessitate a kind of street-smart anthropological ability that shares some unsettling qualities with the level of ethnographic detail that many anthropologists often aspire to. 🌀

David Sausdal is an associate professor at Lund University and a jack-of-all-trades. As an ethnographer with a background in anthropology, criminology as well as sociology, Sausdal studies issues of policing, surveillance, and crime in different countries and context across Europe.

Karen Ito

1947–2023

Dr. Karen Ito was a dedicated anthropologist, committed to promoting the understanding of the diversity of human cultural experience, with significant and wide-ranging contributions to the field of anthropology. She studied anthropology at UCLA, earning her BA in 1969, MA in 1973, and PhD in 1978.



Karen was an extraordinary ethnographic field researcher; her work reflected a concern for, and interest in, others. Her book *Lady Friends: Hawaiian Ways and the Ties That Define* exemplifies her values and her skill in situating people in their cultural contexts. Her focus was on urban women, and through extensive and sensitive conversations with her “lady friends,” she demonstrated that culture went beyond artifacts, language, and visible characteristics: it was a people’s way of thinking and framing the experiences of their lives. In a focus on the ways of resolving conflict, she sensitively and convincingly demonstrated how Hawaiian culture is manifest in the thoughts and understandings of her “lady friends.”

Her research continued to focus on how a people framed events and experiences in that world. Much of this work had an important impact on policy issues. As an affiliate of the Department of Psychiatry and Biobehavioral Sciences at the Neuropsychiatric Institute of the University of California at Los Angeles, she conducted research related to how medical and psychological issues were often impacted by, and interacted with, people’s cultural understanding of the world. Karen understood the strengths and weaknesses of both qualitative and quantitative research and used both to understand events and happenings in the world. Her work with the anthropological consulting group LTG Associates furthered the application of research to policy and practice in relation to mental, physical, and spiritual health (including tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS). In examining problems or situations, she always included the wider sociocultural context. For example, in researching mental health issues among Asian American people, she considered the ethnic identity of the therapist as well as the client.

Karen’s US based research emphasized the experiences of Asian American men and women and went well beyond purely academic publications. She led a major federally funded research project on health care for Asian American women. She designed the first course on Asian American women that is still taught today and was instrumental in establishing the Asian American Studies Center at UCLA. She cared deeply about the experiences of Asian American peoples, making contributions both within and beyond academia.

Karen was committed to those whose lives might be affected by her work and to students engaged in their academic pursuits. She was incredibly gracious and generous to everyone in her orbit.

She excelled as a mentor and contributed constructive criticism to anyone who asked. On the death of her husband, she established the Robert B. Edgerton Endowed Graduate Student Award because she loved seeing students grow and thrive. The fund has supported an impressive array of graduate students’ research, and Karen always took it upon herself to meet and lunch with each of these students, encouraging them in their work. She arranged that upon her death, an endowed professorship, the first in the Department of Anthropology at UCLA, be established, also in the honor of her late husband.

Perhaps Karen’s most enduring contributions are not only in print but linger in the memories of those who were fortunate enough to know her. She was always interested in the stories of others and told these stories well. Her intelligence, her quick wit, her optimism, and her compassion and caring for others set her apart from many, if not most, people. She will be deeply missed by those who knew her. (*Nancy McDowell and Jill Korbin*)

Karen Donne (Kaddee) Vitelli

1944–2023

Karen Donne (Kaddee) Vitelli died on September 12, 2023, at the age of 79 in the town of Dresden, Maine, where she had been living since her retirement from Indiana University in 2006.



Kaddee attended the College of Wooster in Ohio and spent her junior year at the study abroad program, College Year in Athens, where she would get firsthand experience in the classics and archaeology. After graduating from Wooster, Kaddee enrolled in a doctoral program at the University of Pennsylvania. Initially attracted to underwater archaeology at Penn, Kaddee had to settle for land archaeology, as she had contracted tuberculosis as a child and scuba diving would have been a major challenge.

Kaddee’s first professional archaeological experience was in 1968, at Franchthi Cave in the northeast Peloponnesus, where she served as project artist for Tom Jacobson’s excavations there. At the end of that summer, she stayed on in Greece as the University of Pennsylvania fellow at the American School of Classical Studies in Athens. In the summer of 1969, she rejoined the Franchthi Cave project and did a stint in Turkey at the archaeological site of Gordion. Kaddee returned to Penn for two years before taking a job in the Ancient Studies Department at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, where she taught for seven years and directed the excavation of an 8,000-year-old Native American site on the university’s campus.


In 1978, Kaddee was hired by Indiana University, where she taught in the relatively new Program in Classical Archaeology, becoming chair of the department nine years later, at which time she was also promoted to full professor in the Department of Anthro-

pology. She remained at IU for the rest of her career and continued her association with the archaeology of Franchthi Cave and other excavations in Greece.

As a responsible and prolific scholar from the beginning, Kaddee's contributions to the field of classical archaeology are legion. In 1977, she published an analysis of potters' marks on ceramics from Franchthi Cave and the nearby site of ancient Lerna. She continued to publish both books and articles in professional journals regularly for the next three-plus decades. Major works include volumes on the Neolithic pottery of Franchthi Cave and Lerna published in 1993, 1999, and 2007. In addition to her scholarly publications, Kaddee wrote books for the general public, including *Archaeological Ethics* (1996) and *Do I Really Want to Be an Archaeologist? Letters from the Field 1968–1974* (2023). Kaddee was also a pioneer in the area of experimental archaeology, attempting to reproduce the circumstances under which pottery was produced and used in ancient times by making and firing ceramics using only techniques available to Neolithic potters.

Besides her extensive and innovative work in "dirt archaeology," Kaddee also made major contributions to the field of archaeological ethics. She brought attention to the damage caused by looting, uninformed collecting, and the unregulated antiquities market. Between 1975 and 1983, she published a regular column in the

Journal of Field Archaeology, not only on the damage caused by looting and theft but also on efforts, largely ineffective, to legislate and enforce laws to limit such depredations.

In 1977, Kaddee married her IU colleague Reginald Heron, a photographer and educator, who died in 2012. In Dresden, she was an active member of the community, getting involved in the local Conservation Commission, the annual library plant sale, a garden club, the writing of a monthly column, "Seen in Dresden," and other activities and organizations. An avid gardener and enthusiastic bird watcher, she took full advantage of her surroundings. In all respects, Kaddee was a superb scholar, a loyal colleague, a terrific friend, and an overall wonderful person. She will be missed by all who knew her, either directly or through her extensive publications. (Peter S. Allen) 

AN is the AAA's major vehicle for information about the death of our colleagues. Please notify AN (an@americananthro.org) as soon as you learn of a death. We welcome In Memoriam notices of ~500 words with an accompanying photograph. Please check facts with the deceased's family and colleagues prior to submission. For information on potential *American Anthropologist* obituaries, contact obituary editor Ira R. Bashkow (ib6n@virginia.edu).

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