Sovereigns and citizens in close encounter:
Airport anthropology and customs regimes in neoliberal Ghana

ABSTRACT
Through the examination of encounters between Customs officers and travelers at Ghana's international airport, I pose a series of arguments regarding sovereignty and citizenship within a developing state deeply enmeshed in processes of liberalization. Supporting the contention that transnational flows and supranational interventions restructure rather than undermine state power, the Ghanaian case reveals neoliberal conditions to facilitate the expansion of administrative authorities oriented to the cross-border mobility of persons, capital, and commodities. Such bureaucratic realms emerge, in turn, as key arenas for an expression of state sovereignty that is not founded on social alienation and absolute distinctions between rulers and ruled. Because of the multiplicity and ambiguity of regulatory orders at play, sovereignty here hinges on intimacy, emotion, and identification as much as on force and legal sanction.

Kotoka International Airport, which came into existence on small-scale in the pre-war years as a military aerodrome, is now the largest civil airport in Ghana. Since 1946, when the Royal Air Force pulled out and the port was turned to civil use, it has become increasingly associated with international civil aviation and air transport activity in Ghana. The idea of civil aviation in the Gold Coast was conceived on 22nd October 1918 when the first two letters concerning aerial transportation in the colony were received by the Governor from the Vickers Aviation Ltd. This was followed by the first landing of the first powered aircraft by Captain R. S. Rattray, Provincial Commissioner and famous Anthropologist. A few visits to the country by some other aircrafts such as the 3 Royal Airforce Planes in 1930 led to regular air mail service established between the UK and the Gold Coast by Imperial Airways which later became the British Overseas Airways Corporation. This could be referred to as the birth of civil aviation in Ghana.

—Ghana Civil Aviation Authority

Sovereignty only rules over what it is capable of interiorizing.
—Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari

Focusing on the encounters between Ghanaian Customs officers and travelers at Ghana's Kotoka International Airport (popularly known as KIA), I examine how the sovereignty of the Ghanaian state—its capacity to make rules, identify citizens and subjects, and command compliance—is produced in the context of the transnational movement of persons, things, and policies.

At KIA, the fiction of the supremacy of sovereignty's rational–legal face is boldly evident. Although the airport presents itself as a space of rote formality, of regulation and compliance, in Ghana and elsewhere it is lived as a space of emotion and embodiment in extremis. Airports the world over are spaces of physical distance and physical encounter (Augé 1995:87), emotional loss and emotional reunion, fatigue and exuberance, and always, force, manifested in the mass of the aircraft, the jolt of takeoff and touchdown, the burden of luggage, the spaces of containment, cordonning off, gates, security wands, examinations, X-ray machines, and the...
Airports and affect; sovereignty and state agency

Moving beyond an examination of the administrative tactics through which the state rules (Foucault 1978, 1991), the proposed perspective entreats one to consider how the aura of sovereign ultimacy is sustained and internalized by those actors considered to be its source and its object: how state agents configure, replicate, and renew the ability to rule and how they come to be known and felt as a source of rule over others. In short, how the "sovereign," as subject, symbol, and sentiment as well as a system of sanction comes into being opens up to investigation. Begona Arexagaga, drawing on the insights of Philip Abrams (1988), speaks eloquently of the relevance of such a perspective:

Repositioning the question of the state in relation to the meaning of sovereignty [is] particularly crucial . . . at this moment of globalization. . . . The question of subjectivity emerges as critical in a variety of ways. On the one hand, there are the subjective dynamics that link people to states . . . on the other hand is what one could call the subjectivity of state being. How does it become a social subject in everyday life? This is to ask about bodily excitations and sensualities, powerful identifications, and unconscious desires of state officials; about performances and public representations of statehood; and about discourses, narratives and fantasies generated around the idea of the state. The state cannot exist without this subjective component. [2003:395]

Yael Navaro-Yashin (2002:15), in her research in Turkey, likewise takes seriously the political implications of such reflections and associations. Embedded in streams of consciousness, they are an inherent feature of public life for both the agents and subjects of the state, no matter how fleeting or submerged their enunciation. Similarly, in Ghana the encounters between travelers and Customs officials are as much about relationships of power (i.e., who has more and who has less) as they are about the power of relationships to conjure new experiences and potentials of personhood. At KIA, as in Turkish political life, these struggles over position, to borrow Antonio Gramsci's term (1971), dually engage modes of being and modes of resource control, modes of expression and of repression. Michael Herzfeld (1997, 2005) uses a similar concept of a relational self to explore the convergence of values that occurs between state officials and ordinary citizens in negotiations over rights and resources—a process he labels "cultural intimacy." These works lead one to recognize that the traveler, as well as the Customs officer, occupies a spectrum of subject positions and a spectrum of agencies. A reality heightened in the context of prolonged but ever acute neoliberal transition, this multiplicity of selves lends contingency and possibility to airport encounters. Despite the apparent tension between subject and sovereign, their interactions, exemplifying what Herzfeld calls "the tangled skeins of complicity" between rulers and ruled (2005:372), provide a mutually enlivening and legitimizing force. Indeed, the sovereign and the citizen–civilian may exist within the same individual as Customs officers simultaneously engage in the constitution of themselves as persons of worth and personages of power.

Informed by these insights, the analysis presented below is driven by the contention that state sovereignty must be endowed with meaning to be known, turn on experiences of self to be felt, and in some way be socially transactable to matter. Ever-present features of sovereign rule, these dynamics rise to the surface in the face of the multiple disjunctures of neoliberal reform.

African aviation as a hidden neoliberal frontier

Just as Ghana was touted as the leader in the quest for African independence in the 1950s (Davidson 1989), this
West African beacon stands at the cutting edge of neoliberal reform (World Bank 1994, 2003). Ghana was among the very first countries on the continent to adopt World Bank and IMF structural adjustment programs in the early 1980s (Rothchild 1991; World Bank 1984). Since that time, it has remained at the forefront of the neoliberal mandate, promoting economic growth through an array of international loans and credits, streamlining state services, gutting state enterprises and social supports, and imposing strict fiscal conditionalities (Aryeetey and Harrigan 2000), all the while regularly holding parliamentary and presidential elections (Ayyee 2001).

These investments have made the country the target of more and new sorts of interventions.1 Among them is a decade-long overhaul of Ghana’s entire aviation sector that puts the airport at the center of the country’s economic-development agenda. Over the course of the 1990s, the government of Ghana, with the backing of international donors and financiers, devised a plan to establish KIA as a hub for international commerce, investment, and travel for the whole of the West African subregion (Republic of Ghana 1999; Solignac-Lecomte 2002:8). The Vision 2020 Gateway Initiative, funded by an array of innovative international economic partnerships, encompassed the rebuilding of the physical structure of the airport, the reorganization of airport services, and the implementation of a host of new aviation policies (Ghana Civil Aviation Authority 2004b, 2004c, 2004d).2

With aviation a hidden frontier of liberalization on a world scale, the recrafting of Ghana’s airspace went hand in hand with a wider effort to bring the African continent into the fold of global standards. Spearheaded by the International Civil Aviation Organization, or ICAO (Economic Commission for Africa 2001), in Ghana the result was the “Liberalized Skies” policy adopted in 1997 (Ghana Civil Aviation Authority n.d.). Like the establishment of export-processing and tax-free zones with which it was paired, liberalization of the airways was seen as a way to attract investors and facilitate trade (Ghana Civil Aviation Authority 2004a, 2004c; Solignac-Lecomte 2002:8; UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs 2000). Because only four other African states—Egypt, Ethiopia, Morocco, and South Africa—were able or willing to abide by the ICAO accord, these protocols situated Ghana within an elite sphere of global circulation, endowing Ghanaian airspace with a sort of value added, bringing greater traffic, resources, and recognition (Knipe 2000; Pedersen 2001).4 In turn, over the course of the 1990s, Ghana’s aviation sector experienced spectacular development, seeing more passengers, more routes, and more carriers, and creating an accessibility unavailable in most other African nations (Boachie 2003). Between 1995 and 2000 alone, passenger throughput grew more than 50 percent, and aircraft movement increased to close to 10,000 flights, up from 6,500 (Pederson 2001:57). (See Figure 1.)

As is evident in these developments, in Ghana, as elsewhere, airports and aviation are held to be central to the attainment of global modernity.2 Like global cities (Sassen 1998, 2002), satellite relays, and digital communication networks (Appadurai 1996), they are fundamental to participation in the global service economy. Facilitating the mobility of persons, information, and objects, the aviation sector sustains the spread of capital and the possibilities of time–space compression. Marc Augé identifies airports as archetypical “non-place[s] of supermodernity” (1995:86): locations of similitude where national distinctions blur in favor of an anonymous internationalism. Taking the airplane as a point of reference, airports are crafted as spaces apart, with no particular or fixed location and with interchangeable décors and layouts geared to a common functionality of transit.6

To this, Ghana is no exception. Cultivating an order in which the currents of neoliberalism—of commerce, economic extroversion, foreign financing, and the quest for seamless global integration—are on full display, the updated KIA now boasts new passenger and cargo terminals capable of accommodating wide-bodied jets (Airport Technology 2001; Ghana Civil Aviation Authority 2004b; Intertec 2003). The airport has a new check-in area, an expanded departure area, and an upgraded arrival hall. With high-powered air-conditioning 24–7, bright lighting, sleek marble interiors, and signage incorporating the requisite yellow and black international symbols, the stylistics of the KIA renovation conform to widely shared models of airport architecture and amenity. Except for a gift shop selling

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Figure 1. Postal stamps commemorating the founding of KIA. Circa 1970. Courtesy of Ghana Postal Company, Philately Division.
carvings, tie-dyed outfits, and Ghana-made chocolate bars, and a decorative exterior wall reminiscent of the patterning of Ghana’s famous Kente cloth, there are only the barest suggestions of the airport’s Ghanaian location.7

Although they are moving Ghana from the nonplace of obscurity to the nonplace of global position, lying beneath the stylistic manifestations of modernity preoccupying both Augé (1995) and the architects of airport redesign, the reordering of Ghanaian aviation is enmeshed in a complex political economy. This entails struggles over regulations, resources, and recognition within Ghana and without. Significantly, the developments at KIA provide a stage for the renewal and redrawing of the parameters of Ghanaian sovereignty. Building on their long-standing role as “effective sovereign” (Weber 1995), Customs officers working Ghana’s aerial frontier are ensconced in a process of administrative promotion that endows them with new capacities for the sanction and oversight of cross-border traffic and gives them access to international networks and recognition. At the same time, these endowments alter the means available to set and enforce the terms of inclusion and exclusion in the nation-state and, hence, the very criteria through which Customs officials act and are recognized as purveyors of national order. Behind the handsome façade of the airport’s supermodern face-lift, the reconstruction of Ghana’s aviation sector hence reveals less a clash between state sovereignty and global forces than the play of the multiplex determinations of sovereign statehood in neoliberal times: political and economic; national, supranational, and transnational; and social and cultural. The intersection of these regulatory rubrics, as evidenced below, is as much emotional and ideational in character as it is bureaucratic.

Alternative sovereignties

Supporting the contention that the acceleration of global flows and consolidation of multilateral power blocs do not necessarily undermine state sovereignty, the work of Customs officials at KIA demonstrates the specific ways in which political-economic shifts facilitate the expansion and empowerment of bureaucratic regimes oriented to the management of mobility across national frontiers, whether of travelers, commodities, or revenue. Findings from KIA, moreover, challenge the idea that the rise of trans- and supranational engagements and the concomitant expansion of bureaucratic administration are necessarily anomic, widening the divide between the subjects and agents of rule (pace Agamben 1998; Durkheim 1964; Weber 1978). Rather, the encounters and interactions between travelers and Customs officers at the airport suggest that the retooling of sovereign authority in contexts of neoliberal reform rests on the production of new sorts of intimacies—whether social identifications, fantasies, emotions, or notions of self. Affirming the call for a fully cultural approach to the state sensitive to the realm of desire and the psyche (Artaud 2003; Linke 2006; Navaro-Yashin 2002), here it is evident that the systems and symbols of authority that constitute sovereign statehood are as much structures of feeling as they are structures of force: congeries of affect as much as of action. Indeed, in states such as Ghana, given the confluence of multiple and fluid regulatory registers occurring in official spaces of mobility as a result of neoliberalism’s unbridled advance, affective exchange emerges as a primary means of expressing and experiencing sovereign authority.

Undergirding its rethinking in the context of neoliberal reform, the concept of “state sovereignty” carries an extensive history of theorization extending from the era of monarchical absolutism (Bodin 1992; Philpott 2001) to the fluid political arrangements of late modernity (Arrighi 2000; Hashmi 1997; Lyons and Mastanduno 1995). At sovereignty’s core lies an ideal of political ultimacy, of a political authority that is, if not absolute, then at least supreme in its realm (Agamben 1998; Philpott 2003; Schmitt 1985). In the contemporary moment, despite the initial tendency of analysts to construe expanding circuits of commerce and capital as a threat to state authority, it is now well recognized that sovereignty is being reordered, not erased (Trouillot 2001). Sovereignty, scholars are learning, does not “go” easily. Saskia Sassen (1996, 2000), among the most prominent proponents of this point of view, argues that global markets depend on states for regulation, enforcement, and infrastructure, generating arrangements of state-based, but ostensibly “denationalized” rule. Such dynamics have similarly led scholars to speak of the “unbundling of sovereignty” (Ruggie 1993:171), a term referring not so much to the wholesale breakdown of the sovereign state but to its breaking apart, in which certain attributes remain salient—or even gain new relevance—whereas others, namely, its territorial foundations, are reduced in import. This notion of a reconfigured sovereignty, in which both the ends and the means of state power are reordered, is further substantiated in the work of Aihwa Ong (1999, 2006), who points to differentiated or “graduated” sovereignty emerging in the context of East Asian economic restructuring. In this setting, governments assert and share power in highly uneven ways, and different categories of persons, industries, and locations are subject to greater or lesser authority. States, moreover, cede power to corporations, which ultimately come to control particular citizens and territories. Rather than an integrated and consistently governed whole, the nation-state is rendered a mosaic of “zones of special sovereignty” (Ong 2006:100).

These insights provide a crucial foundation for comprehending the character of Ghanaian sovereignty in neoliberal times. But the case of Ghana’s international airport also brings to the fore their limitations. Chief among them
is the focus on a sovereignty that is externally oriented and externally driven: a sovereignty ceded by and for entities outside of the state in question. Yet, as exemplified in the setting of the airport, the possibility exists that, when the loss of autonomy is paired with the increase of state capacity and the promotion of status internationally, ostensibly denationalized arrangements may well bolster the power and perceptions of the state at home. In this situation, the distinction between “denationalization” and “destatization” must be taken seriously (see Jessop 1999:386–388).

The disregard of these concerns in many of the current discussions of neoliberal sovereignty appears to be tied to the tendency to operate on a plane that can be described as “experience far,” privileging the relative (discussions of more or less) over the substantive and putting contractualism (i.e., policy and structure) before emotion and experience. All of this divorces the sovereign from the subject, denying the play of self and sentiment in the production of power. Yet even the earliest theorists of sovereignty acknowledged its fundamental duality: as constructed from above and below, exceptional and popular, suspended and embedded, deriving from law and living in a collective will (Merriam 1900). Nevertheless, this remains a strain only faintly acknowledged in mainstream discussions (see Aretxaga 2003; Bierstecker and Weber 1996), whether of neoliberal restructuring or other issues.

**Transnational mobility and airport ethnography**

My appreciation of this vantage point emerged over the course of ethnographic research I conducted at KIA over a span of ten months in 2001–02 as part of a larger study of the implications of neoliberal restructuring for state sovereignty (Chalfin 2001, 2004, 2008). For three months in the spring of 2001, my research assistants and I spent several evenings a week at the arrival hall awaiting the landing and deplaning of flights from Europe, the United States, and elsewhere in Africa. We watched and listened to processes of passenger clearance: the character and conventions of declaration, interview, and interrogation; baggage examination; and duty computation and collection. We also noted the material manifestations of global travel: the boxes, parcels, suitcases, and product samples accompanying travelers; travelers’ dress and comportment; and the documents and currencies they carried and displayed. And we paid close attention to the sociality of airport life: the tenor of the relationships between travelers and Customs officers as well as among varied ranks of airport personnel.

Despite our receipt of official permission to conduct research, granted in the spirit of “transparency” by the Commissioner of Customs and Customs overseers in the Ministry of Finance, much remained inaccessible to or deliberately hidden from us. Although issues of secrecy color almost any fieldwork endeavor, at KIA this condition was compounded by the climate of suspicion in which Customs officers across the country operated and the distinct status of the airport as a security installation. Although my research assistants and I were free to visit the airport during off-hours and were often welcomed by Customs officers, the conduct of research was far more difficult once flights arrived. To gain permission to enter the arrival hall during these times, I was asked to present my program and credentials to the head of airport security, who then authorized our procurement of the official Ghana Civil Aviation Authority ID tags, which allowed us access to particular areas of the airport for a limited time. Even with the requisite identification, security guards were reluctant to let us enter the airport premises.

By dint of personality or political disposition, some Customs officers were, nevertheless, at ease in our presence, happy to reveal and reflect on the travails of their position, and in some cases, share in its spoils (including the tips they received from travelers). Whether out of suspicion or the sheer intensity of passenger clearance, others were much less comfortable with our curiosity about their work routines. In response, we positioned ourselves in out-of-the-way corners, setting ourselves up in predictable spots so as not to take anyone by surprise, and engaging in informal discussion groups during lulls and breaks in traffic. Yet, in the hurried course of the work and hundreds of hours of observation, a great deal was revealed or at least adumbrated. Roaming the arrival hall with pen, notebooks, and cameras in hand, we learned about Customs officers’ lives, opinions, and aspirations. Whether quotidian or outrageous, celebrated or secreted, their practices and professions provide a window on the making and experience of state sovereignty in contemporary Ghana and other so-called developing polities amidst extended political and economic transition.

Research at the airport brought into view nearly every global flow making its way to and through Ghana. A remarkable contrast to the 1980s, when air traffic trickled, by 2000 the airport was served by over a dozen passenger airlines, from Europe, the former Soviet Union, the Middle East, and Africa: Alitalia, British Airways, KLM Royal Dutch Airlines, Lufthansa, Swissair, Aeroflot, Egypt Airlines, Middle East Airlines, Ethiopian Airlines, South African Airways, Air Afrique, and Ghana Airways (Ghana Civil Aviation Authority 2004a, 2004d). On the transcontinental front, KIA saw multiple daily runs to and from Europe and two or three flights per week to the United States and Asia. Ghana Airways, along with the occasional Nigerian carrier, served the West African coastal route, and the Ethiopian and South African airlines each maintained several flights per week serving the rest of the continent.

The new conditions of Ghanaian aviation intertwine with a diverse social field. The largest portion of passenger
traffic at KIA is made up of Ghanaians and other West African nationals or former nationals caught in the vortex of transmigration, family visitation, and ex- and repatriation. With over ten percent of the population estimated to live abroad (Manuh 2000), the airport is the primary point of transit for hundreds of thousands of Ghanaians who work or seek work in Europe, North America, or the Arabian Gulf region. Although Ghana is touted as a model student of neoliberal reform, the country's supposed economic revival has stimulated and is fully dependent on an economics of exodus. After two decades of shrinking state support and the promotion of international trade at the expense of self-sustaining production (Aryeetey and Tarp 2000), a substantial percentage of the Ghana populace is compelled to seek resources outside of the country (Fine and Boateng 2000; Van Dijk 2002), illustrating what has become a pan-African dynamic (Kane 2002; Koser 2003; MacGaffey and Bazanguissa-ganga 2000).

The airport is also a regular site of departure and return for a Ghanian and Levantine business class moving between Ghana and commercial destinations in London, Dubai, Thailand, Milan, and neighboring West African states on weekly or monthly shopping trips (Darkwah 2002). As is evident in earlier conventions of Commonwealth Citizenship (Carter 1958; Kelly 2004) and other long-standing vectors of transmigration within the continent, these trajectories are not entirely new (Kopytoff 1987; Swindell 1995). Yet the ongoing imbalance of trade and resource extraction has come to necessitate the expansion and augmentation of older patterns and pathways, some, like the clandestine flows of the drug, gold, gem, and currency cartels, moving in unanticipated and unofficial directions (Simone 2001). Alongside both these well-trodden and hidden trajectories of travel is an array of subsidiary circuits. Ghana hosts growing numbers of heritage tourists who enter the country by way of KIA (Bruner 1996; Hasty 2003). They are joined by adventure- and ecotourists, students from abroad, researchers, missionaries, investors, diplomats, and development workers.

Although the multiplex circuitry of trade, travel, and transmigration render the airport a place of global ecumene, the operation and display of state power at KIA is extraordinarily dense. This is not a forgotten strain of state regulation, soon to be nullified by the tide of global circulation. In Ghana, the completion of airport renovation in 2001 coincided with the intensification of state controls. The airport, to begin with, represents a frontier like any other (Donnan and Wilson 1999; Kratochwil 1986; Prescott 1987). Comparable to the numerous border stations guarding land and maritime boundaries, it is a space where state power is concentrated and the movement of persons and goods assiduously monitored. In addition to the Customs Service, KIA is occupied by personnel from Ghana's Immigration Service, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Health, Bureau of National Investigation, Police Service, and Army. The edges of the airport are flanked by a military training school and the Burma Camp army barracks. Although no armed soldiers are present in the public areas of the airport, military personnel oversee the airport and movement is highly regulated, requiring ID badges, escorts, and permission slips for those not in possession of an air ticket, as my research team and I readily learned.

The airport is truly a citadel, and whoever controls it controls the capital city and, potentially, the entire state apparatus. The airport is considered a prime target of coup makers following in the footsteps of those who plotted the 1967 putsch to unseat the airport's namesake, General Kotoka, in which he was murdered. Well aware of this history, Ghana's outgoing head of state, Jerry Rawlings, continued to put military men in the airport's high-ranking posts, even after winning successive democratic elections. Operating with a similar concern, in the wake of the 2000 election, the new government quickly replaced top security officials at KIA and called for a review of security procedures.

**Effective sovereignty and the recasting of Customs regimes**

Customs officials at the airport are deeply enmeshed in the projection of state power and sovereign authority. The Customs Service was established in 1839—a date of origin coinciding with the imposition of a one-half percent duty on all goods and merchandise coming into the Gold Coast settlements and preceding the formal declaration of colonial oversight (Anim-Asante 1988:9). In this way, Customs lay the foundation for colonial control and has since remained a powerful arbiter of statehood in Ghana (Nugent 2002). An administrative edifice of 3,500 employees occupying more than 60 permanent stations throughout the country, Customs consistently generates well over half of the nation's revenue. With the nation's economy heavily dependent on imports attracting an average duty of 20 percent, nearly every citizen feels the pinch of Customs whether or not they interact directly with Customs officers. Customs is also a designated state security agency. Patrolling borders and manning checkpoints throughout the country, the officers of Customs' Preventive wing are typically armed, and all hold the warrant of force. Indeed, in light of its extensive fiscal command, control of force, and widely territorialized presence, Ghana's Customs Service is in many ways fully sovereign, standing for and overseeing the polity at large.

With personnel stationed at the departure gates and arrival hall in the passenger terminal, on the tarmac, and at the air cargo facility, interactions between Customs and travelers are intensely personal. From the opening of suitcases, parcels, and wallets to the exchange of words, documents, and wealth (in modes official and not), Customs
officers are endowed with the authority to scrutinize and make demands on—including the right to detain—every person and object that crosses the airport threshold. At the arrival hall, after disembarking from the aircraft, getting one’s passport stamped by the Immigration Service, and collecting one’s baggage, all travelers must pass through the Customs area. Here, Customs officers inspect travelers’ luggage and documents. In addition to paying duties on items of commercial value, travelers are interviewed by Customs officers about their identities and itineraries. They are also required to make official declarations to Customs officers about their business in Ghana, their plans for departure, the cash and other valuables they may be holding, and whether they have any unaccompanied baggage or cargo.

In the aftermath of Ghana’s historic 2000 elections, which ushered in a new regime after 20 years of rule dominated by a single party and leader (Gyimah-Boadi 2001), Customs officers at KIA find themselves caught in the throes of a complex repositioning emerging out of the shifting interface of state power, transnational connection, and supranational supervision at work at the airport. Forced to contend with new obligations and capacities as well as a new context of operation, officers at KIA have to somehow make workable the changing terms of their authority and that of the Ghanaian state, more generally. Some of these shifts are circumstantial, tied to the logistics of airport renovation and the rapidly rising tide of passenger and cargo traffic. Others are more pointed in their implications. The Vision 2020 Gateway Initiative, for one, made the airport the center of attraction for new, primarily foreign, investment, broadening Customs’ mandate and its significance both nationally and internationally. Customs officers are expected to accommodate new types of commodities and commercial regimes, like those serving Ghana’s fledgling export-processing and nontraditional export sectors and tax-free zones. Following the government’s intent to make the airport a gateway not just for goods but also for investors, there is pressure on Customs from the Ministry of Trade to reorient the organization’s mentality from surveillance and defense to reception and to shift Customs’ functional focus from control to facilitation.

In keeping with this agenda, Customs officers have little choice but to adopt a host of new protocols. Like the emulation of international style and the crafting of interchangeable layouts and décor in the remodeling of the airport, this is a critical element of synchronizing Customs operations with wider transnational trends. As a leading edge of Ghana’s embrace of global bureaucratic rationalities, Customs is responsible for implementing the accords of an array of supra- and international organizations, ranging from the ICAO and the World Customs Organization (WCO) to the World Trade Organization (WTO), World Health Organization (WHO), and Interpol. Ghana is equally a partner in numerous bilateral Customs and trade agreements. Whether to increase speed or predictability—what Customs specialists refer to as “harmonization”—these policies are all about imposing a common blueprint of neoliberal modernity on Customs’ work. This is not a world without borders but a world in which all borders operate according to uniform terms that make mobility their priority.

At the same time that these shifts foster the enlargement of Customs’ mandate and heighten Customs’ profile internationally, Customs’ power and position are under threat domestically. Most problematic for officers at KIA is the process of political diminution confronting the Customs Service as a whole that was incited by the monumental feat of democratic regime change initiated in the 1992 and 1996 elections and finally realized in 2000. In the face of efforts by the new government to wrest power from entrenched and, often, corrupt bureaucracies and relocate it within what is considered to be the legitimate center of government—that is, the electoral order—officers at all levels and locations of the Customs Service, from low-ranking officers to the Customs Commissioner, find themselves under intense scrutiny and sometimes criminal investigation. Although Customs officers may have previously engaged in corrupt practices (Center for Democracy and Development–Ghana 2001), their activities did not change as much as the climate around them.

Because of the place they already held in public consciousness, Customs officers at KIA and elsewhere were made scapegoats for the ills of the outgoing administration. Fueled by a neoliberal rhetoric of transparency championed by the World Bank and Transparency International (West and Sanders 2003), the allegations against Customs officials and their attendant repercussions were particularly vicious. The commanding Customs officer at the airport, with over a decade of experience at his post, was transferred and demoted as soon as the new government came to power. Dozens of other officers at KIA were accused of allowing close associates of the outgoing administration to take unauthorized leave of the country, allowing them to avoid investigation and protect illicit assets. As a result, the entire Customs staff at the airport was threatened with mass transfer. A sign of a more general climate of bureaucratic improvisation—of a political sociality successively unhinged—working conditions at KIA were highly unpredictable in terms of where staff inspect and store goods; interview passengers; or simply place their desks, tariff and duty schedules, and phones.

**Embodying sovereignty: Red and Green, black and white**

Indicative of the dual dynamics of empowerment and uncertainty, at KIA’s arrival hall among the most forceful engagements between travelers and Customs officers revolve around efforts to bring the conventions of passenger...
clearance in line with international standards. International protocols are very much perceived by Customs officers to demonstrate their membership in a supranational order and to legitimate the intensification of state scrutiny. Despite the assimilation of Customs officers into this higher order of rule, the disciplinary tactics officers employ in their encounters with travelers are premised not on alienation but on the very capacity for identification.

To become familiar with globally sanctioned procedures, Customs officers at all levels of the service commonly participated in international initiatives. Nearly every high-ranking officer at KIA has traveled outside of Ghana to attend international seminars. When I first met the commanding Customs officer of the arrival hall, he had just returned to Ghana from a two-week course at the International Customs School in Malaysia sponsored by the WCO and the ICAO, with funding from the government of Canada. Customs officers from other countries, including a whole contingent from the United States and United Kingdom, came to Ghana at least once a year to run seminars, distribute reference material, and train trainers in intense bursts of educational effort.13 (See Figure 2.)

On a rhetorical level, at least, international agendas are taken to heart. By the middle of 2000, the KIA arrival hall was reorganized into two different channels for passenger clearance: one Red, for passengers with goods to declare, and one Green, for those without. A “Risk Management System” was put into place based on the tenets of “security,” “facilitation,” and, most of all, “selectivity,” the new term for “profiling,” according to U.S. Customs agents. The status of Customs officers as middle figures, at once allied with travelers yet doubly authorized, first by the state and next by the international community, to rule over them, is most apparent in regard to selectivity.

In theory, selectivity was to be systematically applied by Customs to different flights and different sorts of travelers. Risk criteria were based primarily on drug smuggling, at the time of fieldwork the basis of Ghana’s significance to international Customs agencies. Ethiopian Airlines and South African Airways flights were ranked high risk because of their possible link to drug-smuggling routes, whereas the Swissair flight was considered low risk because of the high cost of tickets and low likelihood that it would be the flight of choice for illegal couriers. Passports of passengers on flights arriving in Ghana from other parts of Africa were checked for stamps from countries like Burma and Thailand, well-known for their drug supplies, and dozens of drug smugglers were apprehended annually by Customs officers at the airport (Ghanaian Chronicle 2002).

Beyond this focus on smuggling, the way selectivity was put into practice had little to do with the professed standards of the U.S. Customs Service or WCO, the leading forces in international Customs training. It was no secret that the Red and Green channels were used to enforce a divide between Ghanaian and non-Ghanaian travelers and, more generally, between Africans and non-Africans, a distinction described by Customs officers as one between “black” and “white.” Customs officers of both junior and senior ranks time and time again echoed the words of their boss: “The integrity of the Ghanaian should not be relied on. Out of 10 blacks only three will tell the truth about themselves and vice versa for the white traders that we already know, we only narrow them down and the principle of selectivity comes in here.” Or as another officer put it, “The Red channel is for the blacks. We let the whites through; the blacks—the ‘Africans’—won’t tell the truth. The whites will even tell you one or two gifts are commercial, but the blacks . . . Indigenous African-Americans are okay, but any African, Nigerian, etc, [no].”

This sort of profiling on the part of the state agents, built on notions of an embodied morality, conform to what Herzfeld identifies as the state’s tendency to rule through tropes of cultural intimacy that use “the language of kin, family and the body to lend immediacy to its pronouncements” (1997:1). Here, Customs officers’ use of racial
attributes to signal criminal character masks the shifting
ground of their authority brought about by the call of a new
master at home and abroad. Invoking an “us” and “we” of
common stock—the officer who knows what Africans are
like because he or she is one of them by dint of shared
history and kinship—these terminological ploys counter
the actuality of instability with the aura of allegiance. In
staking out a supracategory of “African,” Customs officers
endeavor to broaden the scope of their rule through a
rhetoric of identification and inclusiveness. Transcending
more-transient nominations based on residence or politi-
cal affiliation, these assignments counter the republican
model of citizenship, or jus soli, with a broadly rendered
notion of citizenship as a community of descent based on
the principle of jus sanguinis. Reversing a more typical sce-
nario, in which subjects new or marginal to the state seek
out resources and recognition through the claiming of “ef-
effective citizenship” through normative rather than formal
legal means (Sassen 2002:13), here the sovereign seeks to
claim citizens—subjects through the imposition of informal
yet systematic terms of discipline and belonging, both emo-
tionally and morally charged.14

Contravening the legal definition of citizen, even those
travelers holding foreign passports but bearing a Ghanaian
name or demonstrating proficiency in a Ghanaian language
are accorded the privilege of being treated “as a Ghanaian”
by Customs officers. These sentiments result in a clear-cut
separation of Ghanaian nationals and other Africans from
other visitors—whether African American, Afro-European,
Asian, or Euro-American. Ghanaians are well aware of the
extra scrutiny to which they are subject at the airport. As
one journalist wrote in his weekly column, “Come to Ghana
and what I have learnt is that foreigners get better treatment
than Ghanaians…. These foreigners are just like the nation-
als but their foreignness gives them an advantage nobody,
and no Ghanaian enjoys abroad even if he is a VIP or some-
body in his own Ghana. This discrimination must be cut
out” (Blay-Amihere 2001). Ghanaian travelers complained
that if they were to be scrutinized, so too should other trav-
ellers. Time and again, Customs officers heard the refrain,
“These people should be searched, just as you are search-
ing us. You should see how they treat us when we are at their
place.”

A dynamic suggesting that the importance of border
control to the Ghanaian state hinges on the discipline of
its own citizenry, such an egregious exercise of state power
by Customs officers is not directed at so-called aliens but
primarily at those considered natives or nationals. Playing
on the very distinctions between foreigner and national,
stranger and autochthon, to be recognized as an insider of
note within Ghana’s gatekeeping regime, one must move
outside the boundaries of the state.15 A form of “deep-play”
(Geertz 1973) testing the limits of rule, these strategies
hinge on Customs officers’ double-edged identification
with travelers, at once asserting experiential parity with
them and instituting social divisions among them. Shot
through with desire and disdain, such encounters are
as much affect charged as they are legal and material in
grounds and outcome.

These dynamics offer a telling reconsideration of the
relationship between sovereignty and citizenship con-
ventionally understood through an Aristotelian notion of
“encompassment,” in which citizens are contained within
states that set the standards of behavior and belonging
(Painter and Philo 1995:110). Reversing this formulation,
in locations marked by geographic and political transience,
such as the airport, the conditions of citizen–civilian exis-
tence are no longer exclusively framed by the state. Rather,
a mobile citizenry shapes the character and capacities of
state actors and institutions. Under these conditions, the
gatekeeping operations of the state come to center not so
much on the discipline of aliens or the categorization of
outsiders but on persons considered natives or nationals.16

Customs and classification: Discursive
sovereignty and self-determination

Again interweaving tactics of alienation and affiliation, le-
gal judgment, and personal justification, the Red and Green
channel system and selectivity principle are put to further
effect. Although most Ghanaians, and other Africans, for
that matter, are corralled through the Red channel, they do
not, as a group, experience the authority of Customs offi-
cers in identical ways. But the differential treatment meted
out by Customs officers, contrary to what one might ex-
pect given Customs’ fundamental concern with the collect-
don of duties, does not correspond to the commercial goods
carried by the traveler. Rather, officers’ application of Cus-
toms law depends as much on the attributes of the traveler
as on the things with which they travel—commercial and
noncommercial items alike. Here, a very distinctive form of
“profiling,” to use the term actually preferred by Customs
officers, is put into effect. (See Figure 3.)

Much of this profiling centers on the determination of
each traveler’s profession. After greeting a passenger and
asking him or her to open bags, Customs officers invariably
follow up with the question “What work do you do?”
This coincides with a glance at the passenger’s passport,
which in Ghana includes on the frontispiece a line speci-
fying the passport holder’s profession just below the entry
for name, address, and date and place of birth. The effort to
determine profession is repeated through the examination
of the passenger’s landing card (form C-70). Containing a
bold line asking for statement of profession, this document
had recently been reissued by the Customs Service at the
time of fieldwork, and all airlines were required to distribute
copies to passengers while on board. When I inquired about
the landing cards, I was told that, given the nature of both
the Ghanaian and global economies, a person's profession could change at any time, making it important to obtain a current record not always captured in the passport entry.

Although ostensibly fixated on verifying passengers' reported professions, Customs officers, in actual fact, make little effort to discern whether or not passengers' material endowments are truly professional in nature. This is so despite the explicit directive of Customs Law PNDC #330 that "tools of one's trade" can be brought into the country duty-free. Much more so than determining whether passengers carry objects necessary to their work, Customs officers appear to be interested in the wide array of personal items—from wardrobe to type of suitcase and gift items—a traveler brings into the country. Drawing on the shared symbolic knowledge of state subjects and agents (Herzfeld 1997:29), these encounters invoke an intimacy related to historically specific constructions of socially significant personhood. In 21st-century urban Ghana, this is a personhood thoroughly bound up with class. Somewhat tied to profession but not entirely explained by it, this class-derived identity has everything to do with habits of consumption (cf. Bourdieu 1984; Meyer 1998). Time and again, my research assistants and I heard officers explain the correlation between a person's work and his or her material entitlement. We were told, "You can't treat all passengers the same. The question of discretion comes up all the time...[take a] lawyer, medical officer [who]... goes out of the country once in two years, buys three pairs of shoes and 12 shirts. You don't treat him/her the same as someone who travels once a month and has a boutique." Another officer reiterated, "If a man who lists his occupation as the executive director of a company has a suitcase full of 12 three piece suits, he is likely to get away without paying duty on them. On the other hand, a woman or man listing her or his occupation as a farmer who has these same items in her or his suitcase will be asked to pay tax on them."

To understand the place of class and classification in the making of sovereign rule, one needs to consider the strong connection between Customs, consumption, and political standing. In the minds of many Ghanaians both within and outside of the service, Customs work is an express lane to modern affluence. Although nearly all Ghanaians aspire to similar sorts and signs of upward mobility, in contrast to other occupations, work in Customs is considered a direct means to this end, which is attained in the very course of employment through gifts, payoffs, and preferential access to commercial goods and opportunities. For Customs officers, the achievement of these aspirations is not about wealth alone but visibly conveys a capacity for a distinct sort of self-determination integral to the type of self-made sovereign supremacy discussed by Enlightenment scholars like Jean Bodin (1992). This is not so much about standing above the law but about cultivating an authority that is self-endowed and, therefore, prior to it. The potential for material gain in Customs is closely tied to where one is posted, and KIA is one of three Customs stations, along with Tema Harbor and Aflao on the Togo-Ghana frontier, known as the "Golden Triangle." Officers at the airport see themselves as having a special purchase on entitlements of and to rule.

As the possibility and necessity of international air travel for Ghanaians from all walks of life intensified in the wake of neoliberal restructuring, the premises of Customs officers' assumed right to rule were called into question. Compared with Customs officers, the travelers the officers inspect and interrogate at the airport have followed a very different spatial and economic itinerary that is providing lucrative returns, whereas Customs officers' own material aspirations remain unsatisfied. Customs officers pride...
themselves on their educational credentials, yet many in the growing ranks of economic migrants have little education and have climbed the socioeconomic ladder through unskilled work. They are garnering substantial material gains, sending cars and high-priced consumer items back to Ghana and building houses for themselves and their families, whereas Customs officers back home struggle with a devalued cedi, low official salaries, a rising cost of living, and a tarnished reputation.

Customs officers are explicit about their dislike for travelers, who they feel are beneficiaries of undeserved gains. Referring to a large number of young men from central Ghana who find their way to Germany and are popularly referred to as “burghers,” one Customs officer remarked, “Asanti burghers in their mid-30s who got a visa out of the country by a stroke of luck think of themselves as being better than everybody else.” Another confided, “Ghanaians who have gone abroad think they are superior to the Customs officials, meanwhile, they do menial jobs when they travel abroad.” The disdain of Customs officers for Ghanaian travelers is often reciprocated. It was not uncommon to hear travelers haranguing the officers who inspect them: “Search it, put your hands inside and search it. You don’t know how to do your job.” One woman responded to the request to be searched by asking, “Do you want me to throw my panties on the floor?” to which the Customs officer replied, “Stupid idiot.” Powerless to directly combat the abuse, yet conveying the sentiment that she was no longer fully under the purview of the Ghanaian state, the woman then remarked, “If we were outside, I would have worked you over real good. Unleash this kind of behavior on someone else.” In such exchanges, Customs officers’ sense of their moral and material entitlement to rule, along with its acknowledgment by others, is under blunt attack.

Sparked by the drama of these encounters and the objects and emotions conveyed, impressions linger long after passengers leave the arrival hall. In exchanges among Customs officers, sentiments not only of insecurity but also of renewal can be heard. Conversations consistently touch on themes of wealth and mobility. Demonstrating Customs officers’ knowledge and longing more than personal reality, when we asked about their economic aspirations, they were quick to mention their interest in traveling abroad: “to send my wife to Dubai to purchase goods for her shop, to work in London to raise money for a new car, or taking a fantasy vacation to a Caribbean Island.” Officers suggested that treating passengers well at the airport could lead to the opportunity to leave Ghana, as, I was told, had happened to a former Customs colleague, who was invited to the United States by a traveler and is now a U.S. citizen. In a bout of verbal play, a group of officers joked that they were “trillionaires” with the capacity to hand out BMWs and fly my research assistant—by helicopter—anywhere in the world she wanted to visit. Turning fantasy into reality, one of the senior officers at the airport arrival hall proudly confided that, when he was voted the top Customs officer at KIA in 2000, he received a free ticket to the United Kingdom on British Airways and spent a month in London.

No doubt these verbal jousts have a competitive, compensatory edge. But what sort of sovereignty is at stake in these exegetical interludes? If one takes seriously this mode of “fabulation” (Stewart 1996), one can see how these commentaries enable Customs officers to project themselves into a realm of agency and endowment built on the catalog of ideas and objects gleaned from transnational travelers. No less powerful for its phantasmagoric form, this discursive space mediates the contradictions of political and economic transposition and brings to the surface the emotional and discursive terrain of sovereignty in the face of shifting material conditions and relations. These narratives reflect the very sort of structures of feeling—feelings of structure of concern to Marxist culture theorists such as Raymond Williams, in which, as George Marcus and Michael Fischer observe, “dominant and emergent trends in global systems of political economy are complexly registered in language, emotions and imagination” (1986:78). Interlacing the material world and the world of desire and taking mobility as their root metaphor, these flights of fantasy exemplify the type of imaginative work identified by Arjun Appadurai (1996:31) as characteristic of transnational experience. Extending Appadurai’s insights, importantly, these exegetical interludes demonstrate the centrality of the transnational imaginary not only to those who cross borders but also to those who occupy and enforce them. More than simply a commentary on conditions of dislocation, these expressive conventions provide a means to alter and arrest them.

High-tech elites and supranational endowment

Other realms of transnational trade and travel provide Customs officers with a more direct path to empowerment and status elevation. In the spring of 2000, Ghana, along with a host of other developing countries, was put on notice to carry out a series of decrees emanating from the WTO as a condition of continued membership (WCO 2003). These dictates centered on the WTO Agreement on Customs Valuation and required Customs officers to use a new and radically different procedure for determining value, the very basis of Customs duties. Rather than officers using a list of fixed and standard values generated by the Customs Service itself, as they did in the past, the new guidelines required an approach to value based on “market” determination. Known as “Transaction Value,” this is “the total payment made or to be made by the buyer to or for the benefit of the seller for the imported goods. It includes all payments made as a condition of sale of the imported goods by the buyer to the seller or by the buyer to a third party to satisfy an obligation of the seller. In most cases, this
will be the invoice price" (WTO 2003a). The WTO also stipulated that Transaction Values be verified by cross-checking the received value against those obtaining in other similar transactions, a process requiring communication with sellers and manufacturers by means of electronic networks and computerized databases (WTO 2003b).

Handed down from on high, the WTO valuation agreement may well be considered a sign of what Sassen (1996) calls “denationalization,” in which the state answers the call of other masters. The WTO directives, like the principles of selectivity and risk management, equally operate as a means of state empowerment. They give Customs a supranational legitimacy and endow Customs officers with new grounds and techniques for rule, enmeshing them in the social fabric of the nation at the same time as they reposition them globally. These adjustments are not entirely in conformity with the WTO’s vision or intention. Despite the commercial ease and acceleration promised by the WTO, putting the Customs Valuation Agreement to work at KIA was beset by numerous challenges. Importers rarely have or are able to present credible documentation because they typically purchase goods in low volumes, off the books, or second hand. Although Customs headquarters and the offices at Tema Harbor were undergoing preliminary computerization at the time of fieldwork, it had yet to hit the airport.

These gaps and ambiguities become glaringly apparent as Customs officers grapple with new commercial trends, among them, the growing trade in high-tech consumer items. The airport is a major conduit for the movement into Ghana of cell phones, computers, and computer parts and accessories, such as scanners, printers, PC cards, and more. Customs officers face the perennial problem of determining whether these goods are being imported for commercial use or if they are personal items. Although officers encounter this consideration in the clearance of other commodities, because of the high value of high-tech items, quantity—the usual arbiter of the personal–commercial divide—is a poor indicator of economic intent. In a situation giving rise to new sorts of trading roles and new sorts of individuals entering into trade, high-tech electronics, even if imported in low volume, can be the source of substantial profit. The problem is compounded by an even more basic challenge of correctly identifying and classifying the goods at hand. Many items are so new or so specialized that Customs officers have little knowledge of their function, leaving them ill equipped to assess the items’ value in a manner in keeping with WTO protocol or to determine their proper duty rate.

Because the old standardized Customs values did not even mention the new sorts of imports and the Transaction Value system could hardly be applied to the small-scale importer in a manner envisioned by the WTO, Customs officers at the airport were left to their own devices. In the face of this reality, they generated a database of values specific to the arrival hall. Not exactly what the framers at the WTO had in mind, the database was gleaned from an unusual sort of public culture. It included the few credible invoices officers could find and a whole array of promotional material—catalogs from discount electronics distributors in the United Kingdom, brochures from the Dell computer company, flyers and advertisements from international newspapers, and even an Amazon.com brochure I gave them. All of this information was compiled in a handwritten reference volume consisting of a packet of long lists, photocopies of invoices, and attached pieces of paper that was copied and recopied and stored in the desk drawers of the senior officers charged with assessing value. To maintain this unofficial but consistently referenced data bank, officers were constantly engaged in informal market research. One of my research assistants noticed a Customs official intently reading the information on a box containing a scanner. I heard another ask a traveler, “What are IO cards? Are they like smart cards?” Working hard to ascertain not just what these products were but also their worth, several senior-ranking Customs officers charged with the assessment of duties cultivated alliances with specific importers they saw as reputable leaders in the computer business and relied on them to provide both product information and values.

The documentary bricolage compiled by officers at KIA constituted a parallel symbolic form to the social poetics worked out through jokes, secrets, and body language as described by Herzfeld. Combining formalism with irony (Herzfeld 1997:15), this assemblage both parodied the promise of the electronic database and took its place. A uniquely Ghanaian version of WTO protocol, it contained values gleaned from personal experience and the physical artifacts of transaction, rather than from anonymous and electronic data envisioned by the WTO Agreement on Customs Valuation. But in contrast to cultural formulaics discussed by Herzfeld (1997:35), which ultimately reinforce state hierarchy, in Customs officers’ making and utilization of their database, the terms of authority are less clear-cut. Although the database references the WTO’s overarching authority, as an approximate and somewhat parodic form, it equally references the autonomous interaction of Customs officers and travelers from which it was actually created. Accomplishing another inversion of power and position, the database similarly avails otherwise unorthodox high-tech traders of the documentary authority of the state while it connects Customs officers to a category of commodity and realm of transaction that extends beyond their territory and control. Although Customs officers demonstrate their ultimate authority in the assessment of value, their dependence on private-sector entrepreneurs makes for a new sort of elite alliance.

Rising to the WTO standard yet set apart from it, the pacts and adjustments made by Customs officers and travelers in the creation of the ersatz database mark a claim to
the aforementioned processing fee was calculated. Each item along with a declared market value from which effects also required the PUBD to include a description of line with WTO standards, the new ruling on personal effects coming into the country in addition to a host of other special taxes, all of which Customs was obligated to collect. At the same time that the new fees signaled a distinctively Ghanaian sovereignty. Like the Asian capitalist networks described by Ong (1999), this is an authority not restricted to state agents but shared by ruling elites who operate within the state and outside it and who situate themselves within Ghanaian territory and a wider global commercial circuitry. Although more practical than official, gaining force from a complex cultural imaginary, this is a sovereignty that is national and transnational without being fully subordinate to the supranational even as it partakes of and gleans recognition from its norms.  

Undeclared baggage: State discipline and sovereign restoration

Travelers passing through KIA are not merely targets or objects of control on which state agents draw for the public and private fashioning of their authority. Exemplifying classic republican ideals in which sovereignty depends on the authorization of “the people” (Philpott 2003), Ghana’s mobile citizenry are keepers of the state in their own right, actively involved in establishing and policing the parameters of rule. Illustrating what might be considered a Hobbesian submission to sovereign oversight (see Hobbes 1968), such policing is not always about curbing state power but also involves its reinstatement. At KIA, this dynamic can be discerned in the negotiations surrounding the filing of a Passengers Unaccompanied Baggage Declaration, or PUBD. Most Ghanaians returning home, whether for a short visit or a longer stay, send unaccompanied baggage by airfreight or as containerized cargo in addition to checked passenger baggage. Although they might include commercial goods explicitly destined for market, more often travelers ship goods they intend to distribute to friends and family or invest in their own property in Ghana. In addition to personal items such as clothing, these goods might include building supplies, household fixtures, electricity generators, agricultural implements, and even automotive parts.

When the yearly budget was released in early 2001—the first year of the newly elected New Patriotic Party (NPP) government—it included a provision (Section 7 of 1996 Act 512 Amended) requiring a one percent processing fee on personal effects coming into the country in addition to a host of other special taxes, all of which Customs was obligated to collect. At the same time that the new fees signaled at least a superficial commitment to the tariff reductions demanded by the WTO free-trade agenda, they provided an alternative source of revenue to the state from the influx of new and used goods that are a hallmark of the neoliberal era. Further instituting a market-based economic logic in line with WTO standards, the new ruling on personal effects also required the PUBD to include a description of each item along with a declared market value from which the aforementioned processing fee was calculated. 

Explicitly distinguished from a tax, the fee cast a wide net and was applied to a range of goods and transactions, even those determined tax exempt by Customs statutes, from goods imported by churches and religious bodies to gifts and educational materials. The new provision marked a departure from earlier procedures, which only required a general description of contents and approximation of their combined value from travelers declaring personal effects; the goods were then allowed into the country duty-free. For several months after the new policy was announced, travelers remained unaware of the new fee. Sharing in the tendency to peg self-worth to material wealth, they inflated the value of their unaccompanied baggage when interviewed by Customs officials, much as they had done in the past. Conscious of the judgments of fellow passengers queued behind them and the possibility of flaunting the value of their cargo to friends and relatives who might accompany them to pick up the items, travelers commonly reported shipments and parcels containing tens of thousands of dollars worth of goods.

Deliberations around the new policy created a frustrating situation for travelers and Customs officers alike. When travelers finally collected their unaccompanied baggage from the harbor or airfreight office, they were shocked to find a new payment in store. Likewise, Customs officers clearing the goods were expected to make time-consuming calculations requiring the detailed valuation of all items—from weighing used clothes to researching the market value of used appliances—all to apply the one percent fee. Customs officers at the arrival hall consequently found themselves besieged by travelers requesting adjustments to the values originally declared on the PUBD many weeks after their original date of arrival.

Seeking to stave off the growing onslaught of petitions and voicing their newfound sense of parity with the traveling class, Customs officers manning the arrival hall’s PUBD desk decided to inform travelers requesting a form of the new fee and ask them if they wanted to reassess the declared values of their goods. Giving voice to the anticorruption rhetoric increasingly central to neoliberal ideology both at home and abroad (Hasty 2004), numerous travelers reacted with suspicion to this “customer friendly” application of the law, bringing complaints to higher levels of the Customs administration, much to Customs line officers’ surprise. Adding to the general discrediting of the Customs Service already in the air, so vocal and vehement were these charges that several officers at the arrival hall were subsequently transferred or demoted.

It is not difficult to attribute travelers’ response to Customs officers to their overarching disdain for the state’s mounting intrusions. But these confrontations may also be read to reveal another level of signification, rent with the ambivalences of “attachment and disavowal,” characteristic of citizens’ attitudes toward the overarching specter of sovereignty.
state authority, more generally (Aretxaga 2003:399). Specifically, Ghanaian travelers’ resistance to Customs officers’ attempts at empathy might be interpreted to signify an almost nostalgic longing (Herzfeld 1997:111) among transnational citizenry for a style of rule in which state authority is distinguished from the populace. Although vicarious, in contrast, Customs officers’ sense of identification with travelers is nevertheless central to their efforts to renew their authority in the face of shifting economic and political conditions.

It is unclear whether travelers, in challenging Customs officers’ entreaties, were deliberately articulating a language of transparency driven home in the European or North American states where they resided or, alternatively, if they were seeking to impose claims on their state of origin to redress their often temporary and always tenuous standing as Africans abroad. What does seem apparent, however, is that the transnationals involved in these encounters sought to instate a boundary between Customs officers and themselves, no matter how similar their origins, aspirations, worldviews, or consumption habits. It is possible to speculate that, for these travelers, the state was a domain apart; although it could be approached, negotiated with, reformed, and maligned, it was not to be assimilated, at least not on its own terms. At once expressing disdain and desire for state authority, evident here is a societal struggle to police the terms and agents of rule, even if to reinstate them in more proper form. These interactions and accompanying imaginaries, hence, represent a domain in which the tenuous yet ever-powerful boundary between state and society is objectified (cf. Mitchell 1991).

Conclusion

In this article, I train a lens on Ghana’s KIA and Customs personnel to argue that air travel and the manifold policies and infrastructures that enable it represent a hidden frontier of neoliberal reform. Ethnographic observations at KIA suggest that the proliferation of supranational regulatory rubrics and transnational flows within the airport do not undermine state authority. Rather, they provide a means for state officials to intensify their scrutiny of mobile subjects in ways both highly technocratic and deeply personalized. Through the extraction, imposition, and assimilation of various forms of intimate knowledge, customs officers simultaneously gain mastery over and identify with a traveling citizenry.

Such adjustments and repositionings, far from existing as purely contractual relations between rulers and ruled, are shot through with desire and the prerogatives of self-making. Moving beyond the communitas of the “cultural intimacy” of bureaucratic encounters identified by Herzfeld (1997, 2005), these interchanges not only rely on the affirmation of a common culture but their articulation also serves to recalibrate political distinctions much more than to mediate difference. The dynamics in play at Ghana’s airport thus provide a striking illustration of the always exploitative potential of the “fantasy” life at the foundation of state authority captured by Aretxaga, who asserts that “rational technologies of control [are necessarily] animated by a substrate of fantasy scenes” (2003:402–403). Indeed, from a comparative vantage point, one can argue that the political force of the state’s imaginative terrain is most pronounced in conditions of flux, whether in Ghana or the context of political and cultural upheaval described by Navaro-Yashin (2002) in her examination of Turkish public life. Although in a different context than the mass spectacles showcased by Navaro-Yashin, a similar form of affective production can be found at Ghana’s international airport, a domain committed to the heavy hand of bureaucratic procedure and intense dyadic engagements between state agents and subjects, rather than collective ceremonial.

The case of Customs at KIA, moreover, suggests the importance of moving beyond the examination of bureaucratic intimacy in terms of the semiotics of isolated interactions (pace Herzfeld 1997, 2005) to the way these “close encounters” configure and are configured by the wider institutional and historic context. Namely, the material cum sentimental transpositions occurring in the course of Customs clearance magnify as much as rework the wider disjunctures of neoliberal reform. Specifically, in the rendering of sovereignty at the airport, it is transnational actors—namely, Ghanaians by birth or citizenship who have invested themselves in the circuitry of international trade and travel—who present the greatest challenge to the substance and distribution of state authority and are the targets of state intervention. A twist on conceptions of popular sovereignty in which the populace authorizes the right to sovereign rule (Locke 1884) and on classic conceptions of citizenship in which states set standards of behavior and belonging (Painter and Philo 1995), Customs officials manipulate the markers of popular identity and experience to manage a stratum of citizens–subjects who are increasingly geographically and socioeconomically mobile.

As evidenced in the exchanges between Customs officers and high-tech importers, such adaptations alter the basis of rule as well as the boundaries of the ruling class. Made clear in Customs officers’ compilation of a simulated database at once instantiating and mocking the authority of the WTO valuation regime, state agents garner the means to rework supranational conventions and interventions as they see fit. Bridging the personal and the official, the stuff of commerce and the stuff of regulation, the domestic and the imported, this example demonstrates that the components of sovereign imaginaries—from dreams of wealth and travel to computer hardware and data-management systems—have a broad currency by no means exclusive to national governance.
Another lesson learned about neoliberal statehood from the case of Ghana’s Customs authorities and international airport is the limitation of studying state making exclusively in terms of the conventional realms of politics. In Ghana, for instance, despite the attention focused on electoral reform, democratic consolidation, and executive power by policy makers and scholarly analysts alike, it is ostensibly marginal political domains—the airport, borders, and Customs officials, along with expatriated citizens and travelers—that emerge as crucial sites for the transformation and constitution of political authority. This is not because the airport represents a site of the open-ended, de-racinated supermodernity of global flows, as Augé (1995) would have it, but because the airport concentrates an assemblage of distinct and not always compatible forces of reform, each of which claims the state in different ways. Among them are various international regulatory fields of the WCO, WTO, U.S. Customs, the World Bank, and the ICAO. The airport also concentrates the flows and aspirations of a population whose members are rendered increasingly mobile by the attractions and attenuations of market-based government and whose entry and exit are intensively policed by authorities in the North Atlantic states where they work and reside. Redesigned and reimagined, the airport is, likewise, a site of contestation and collaboration between a plethora of state overseers from the private sector, including architecture and construction firms, investors, and development banks.

Revealing the aerial frontier to be a critical space of political and economic endowment in global neoliberalism, Ghana is not alone in its overhaul of airport facilities, engagement of international regulatory rubrics, or the intensification of air travel among nationals and nonnationals alike. Neither is Ghana unique among developing and transitioning countries in its heavy reliance on Customs revenue and the ongoing expansion of Customs responsibilities. Indeed, in Ghana and elsewhere, the conjoined revamping of airport infrastructure and Customs conventions reveals the creation of zones of denationalized rule (Sassen 1996) paired with a dynamic of state inscription in which the state’s managerial role is put on full display. Like the growing autonomy of national financial bodies with regard to the flow of currencies, capital, and debt (Lee and Lipuma 2004), here the technocratic control of the mobility of persons and commodities via Customs authorities comes to stand as a necessary (if minimal) criterion of stateness in neoliberal times.

In this context, compared to the zones of exclusion described by Giorgio Agamben (1998), where the suspension of law serves as the sovereign’s modus operandi, one finds a rather different process of depoliticization at work, fostering a much more diffuse and dynamic reconfiguration of sovereignty. Although Customs officers at the airport find themselves reendowed by the rise of international rubrics, with little national or official recourse to their formulation, they nevertheless stand outside of these regulatory domains. But similar to the petty sovereigns described by Judith Butler (2004), here Customs officers’ power lies not in the capacity to shape or suspend the “law” but in their discretionary imposition of technicalities of rule already considered “paralegal” in the sense of being both trivial and matter of fact. Transnational travelers, in turn, find themselves objects of intensive regulation. Their mobility is contingent on the attenuation of their full participation in national politics, but the same mobility provides them a purchase on the very international norms that have come to infiltrate the governing practices of their state of origin, enabling them to challenge and augment the new terms of rule.

Attesting to the critical importance of the return to “the subject” in studies of political economy called for two decades ago by Marcus and Fischer (1986), for the diverse categories of persons who work and move through the airport, the ambiguities and possibilities of neoliberal conjuncture are engaged by way of the social and affective realm. Similar to the haunting emotional worlds of unauthorized migrants described by Susan Coutin (2005), in spaces of transit and transition such as KIA, beset by incompatibilities and ever-shifting agendas, subjective states—narratives, identifications, moral judgments, fantasies, and fears—offer an unparalleled archive of the multiplex registers of sovereign authority and transformation for state agents and subjects alike.

Notes

Acknowledgments. Field research for this article was carried out in 2000 and 2001 with the support of the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research and the National Science Foundation. In Ghana, I benefited from an affiliation with the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana-Legon and the ongoing support of the director, Dr. Takyiwaa Manuh. This study would not have been possible without the permission of the Commissioner of the Ghana Customs Excise and Preventive Service and the Ghana Civil Aviation Authority along with the cooperation of Customs officers at Kotoka International Airport. In Accra, Raymond Kwaku Afawubu and Akosua Darkwah provided outstanding research assistance and ongoing feedback. An early examination of the research was presented at the Institute of Advanced Study “Corruption Seminar” in March 2003. In the course of preparing this article, Jennifer Hasty, Luise White, and Maria Stoilkova provided valuable advice and encouragement, as did Don Donham and AE’s anonymous reviewers. I thank them and AE’s editorial staff for their assistance. All errors and oversights remain my own.

1. Abiding by the usual directives—liberalizing foreign exchange rates, selling off state-owned enterprises, shrinking state employment and social spending, and promoting export and foreign investment—Ghana has shown sustained economic growth averaging four to five percent per annum (Aryeetey and Harrigan 2000).
These policies have not been without problematic consequences, generating growing disparities between elites and the working class and between urban and rural regions, a renewed dependence on the world market for basic goods, declining domestic food security, and falling access to basic services such as health and education (Brydon and Legge 1996; Yeboah 2003). A result is Ghana’s inclusion in the World Bank’s Highly Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) program and Poverty Reduction Strategy Initiative (Whitfield 2005), despite the country’s apparent macroeconomic success.

2. Initially bankrolled by British government official development assistance to the tune of £23 million, KIA’s renovations embody the goals of neoliberal reform so well that, in 2002, after Britain’s Prime Minister Tony Blair used the airport on his visit to Africa, his government proclaimed it to be “one of the few large projects successfully concluded by HIPCs in recent years” (Export Credits Guarantee Department 2002). Signaling the maturation of the project’s neoliberal logic, a second phase of airport enhancement was financed by loans totaling more than $40 million from the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation (HSBC), the French bank Paribas, and Ghana’s Ecobank. Construction for both phases was carried out by the giants of multinational construction and contracting—Taysec, Skanska, and Siemens Plessy (Airport Technology 2001).

3. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, a series of accords targeting African airspace was put into play, the most significant being the 1988 Yamoussoukro Declaration on a New African Air Transport Policy (Economic Commission for Africa 1999:2, 2001:2; Goldstein 2001:222). Periodically revived and revised over the years (ICAO 2002), Yamoussoukro established a new baseline for African air transport, promoting private investment, restricting national control, and establishing for its signatories a set of common rules (Economic Commission for Africa 2001:2).

4. Further, contributing to Ghana’s rising rank and recognition within the space of global aviation, in the late 1990s, KIA became “one of only 5 airports in Africa to have the FAA accreditation to fly directly to the USA” (AZ Airports On-Line 2004; FDCH Regulatory Intelligence Database 2001; Goldstein 2001:233).

5. Indeed, from Mali to Tanzania, South Africa to Ethiopia, high-cost airport enhancement efforts are underway across the African continent.

6. A case in point, the London-based Azhar Architecture firm, well-known for its design of total environments incorporating work, living, and transit space, was responsible for KIA design (Azhar Architecture 2005a, 2005b).

7. Fostering this sort of aesthetic internationalism, overseas firms were also the source of the airport’s interior designs. A telling commentary on the proliferation of such look-alike spaces of commerce and convenience, the vendor responsible for the airport’s flight-status screens, on its website (PAI Group 2003) compared its work at KIA to its other projects, providing visuals of London nightclubs and the Warner Bros megaplex cinema chain.

8. As Esi Dogbe (2003) suggests, for these reasons the airport is also very much a space of collective fantasy and frequently appears in popular Ghanaian videos.

9. That Rawlings continued to be addressed as flight lieutenant (the rank he held when he led his 1979 coup) throughout his long tenure as head of state illustrates the deep tie between the control of airspace and political might.

10. Again affirming the link between the airport and executive power, when J. A. Kufuor assumed the presidential post in 2001, he chose not to reside in Christianbourg Castle, as had his predecessors, but to remain at his private home located in the prestigious Airport Residential Area adjacent to KIA.

11. The tremendous dependence of the state on Customs revenue, common throughout the nations of Africa and less developed countries elsewhere in the world (World Customs Organization 2003), is in contrast to highly industrialized states such as the United States, Canada, and EU members, in which Customs work is primarily about arresting the flow of restricted and prohibited items such as drugs and firearms and much less about taxation. Yet even in the United States, prior to WWI and the imposition of the income tax, Customs provided the primary share of government revenue (Andreas 2000).


13. Even in bilateral programs, the crafting of a global Customs agenda was evident. This outlook was part and parcel of a seminar carried out by the U.S. Customs Service and the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms in October 2000. Including Customs officers from Anglophone states across the West African subregion—Nigeria, Liberia, and Sierra Leone—the seminar took place at an exclusive Accra hotel. Signaling the expanding U.S. role as an international security hegemon even before September 11, 2001, its focus was “The New International Criminal” and “International Criminal Organizations.”

14. On this point, see Coutin 2005 for a discussion of the legal fictions of citizenship at work in situations of transmigration.

15. The extent of Customs investment in a de facto policy of free movement for so-called foreigners became evident one night when the arrival hall was packed with hundreds of pilgrims who had just returned on chartered flights from Mecca. Their arrival caused huge delays in passenger clearance, and there seemed no end to the persons or merchandise crowding the arrival hall. The thick crowd congregated outside the exit doors to welcome their kin back from the hajj added to the crush, making it all but impossible to leave the hall. Taking the matter into his own hands, the Customs officer in charge for the evening commandeered an otherwise locked door to create a new point of egress. He made it clear, however, that this separate and expedited exit, which bypassed Customs examination, was for foreign travelers only. The remaining Ghanaian travelers, pilgrims and nonpilgrims alike, were detained in long lines, and they and their luggage were subject to careful inspection.

16. In postcolonial locations such as Ghana, where the hand of neoliberalism and the legacies of imperial rule have long made the pace and scale of extortion arbiters of survival, this process is well evidenced. But also in the United States, following September 11, 2001, one can see how the spaces and personages of transience are becoming increasingly central to the making of national policy and the proving of state power not just for the so-called alien but also for the citizen.

17. Sharing this disapproval, the author of a popular newspaper column, “The Imported Ghanaian,” in an entry entitled “Call the Fashion Police,” poked fun at the flamboyant outfits worn by the Ghanaian “boggers” (i.e.,burghers) when they return to Ghana (Sunprim 2000:3).

18. Helpful to capturing the way such localized encounters reference much more abstract and geographically dispersed orders is Karin Cetina and Urs Bruegger’s discussion of “global microstructures,” that is, “patterns of relatedness and coordination that are global in scope but microsocial in character and that assemble and link global domains” (2002:907).

19. Although I do not suggest that the electoral realm in Ghana is only a mask or diversion deflecting attention from the real stage
of power, as do Nina Glick Schiller and Georges Fouron with respect to Haiti. I emphasize the need to look closely at the interplay of what they term the "apparent state" (1989:210) and parallel productions of political order—what might be called the "effective state"—within the bureaucratic arenas of customs and border management, among others.

20. This is not to say that the airport is not vulnerable to the possibility of the law's suspension, as Mateo Taussig-Rubbo's (2007) research on the jurisdictional uncertainty and abusive practices of asylee interrogation at Los Angeles International Airport makes clear.

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accepted May 12, 2008
final version submitted April 15, 2008

Brenda Chalfin
Department of Anthropology
University of Florida
Turlington Hall, Room 1112
PO 117305
Gainesville, FL 32611
bchalfin@anthro.ufl.edu