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(AT) PLAY IN THE POSTCOLONY

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ABSTRACT

“(At) Play in the Postcolony confronts Senegal’s current labor crisis through a sustained historical and ethnographic study of a government who claims the recent success of the national soccer team as evidence of its own efficacy (despite being famously unsuccessful at resolving the nation’s economic woes), and youth determined to escape chronic unemployment by playing for professional teams abroad.

In my dissertation, I address the state’s project to use sport as a way to attract foreign investment while working to manage its young population during an economic crisis in which ‘urban youth’ constitute 40% of the total 48% unemployed population. I am concerned with understanding what happens when economically marginalized subjects use sport to petition for better social standing: this is true for “youth” and “state” officials alike since both are convinced that harnessing athletic abilities makes them eligible for the pursuit of increased prosperity, and both expect social transformations to occur based on their proximity to international networks. Yet while state officials use soccer to unify the nation, project an image of virility, and align the country with its vision of African neoliberalism, youth are increasingly interested in using basketball to build careers, taking advantage of the transnational corporations and NBA teams that have developed a recent interest in this west African locale. Even though the two sports follow different trajectories, these postcolonial hoop dreams parallel the government’s
new interest in cultivating relationships with the United States and other countries it believes will assist its neoliberal aspirations. In these contexts, success is equated with the athletic performance of all-male cadres whose most prominent members spend very little time in the country since they play for professional teams abroad. They are nevertheless valorized in collective aspirations for success. By understanding how this interest in sport is created and sustained in state discourses and conversations with unemployed youth, I explore the techniques and strategies through which subjects use the skills at their disposal—or the traits with which they believe they have been blessed—to better their socio-economic positions through the confluence of institutional resources “at play” in the postcolony.
“Enabl[ing] the Lions to Win”:
Success under Neoliberal Conditions

Harnessing “the support of the entire nation”

When Abdoulaye Wade joined Senegalese students in Paris, France on November 18, 2002 for what he hoped would provide a much-needed publicity boost, he was met with hostility. As students demanded to know what the government had done to ameliorate Senegal’s most pressing social problems, the Head of State hastily marshaled evidence in support of his Presidency’s “successes.” Deflecting blame to former Prime Minister Madame Madior Boye—whom he had dismissed for incompetence in her efforts to communicate his political platform to the nation—Wade claimed his presidency had in fact been responsible for higher salaries nationwide, recent aid to drought victims, and the national team’s victory over France in the World Cup a few months prior (“I enabled the lions to win”). The World Cup victory, in his view, followed from his success at winning “the support of the entire nation.”

Increased salaries had a limited impact on an economy reeling from decades of scarce employment. The government’s relief effort for drought victims was unprecedented but arguably falls within a state’s acknowledged responsibilities to its citizens. Wade’s third “success,” however, is more peculiar and, for that reason, warrants sustained inquiry: Why should the performance of the national football team be viewed as a victory for the Presidency? Why was it mentioned alongside other aspects of domestic policy? What is the position of sport in the Senegalese political imagination, and how has that role been shaped by the political initiatives promoted under Wade? In
other words, even if the president deserved credit for this triumph, why was it so significant? Why did Wade believe Senegalese people ought to share his enthusiasm, and why was the victory indeed viewed as one of the most significant events in recent history by the general population?

Putting a sporting event on par with a life-saving intervention and an effort to fight the ongoing labor crisis might seem bizarre to persons unfamiliar with contemporary Senegalese politics, but sport has actually been a prominent feature of Senegal’s postcolonial political agenda—for the national image it has allowed the President to cultivate, for the ways NGOs and governmental ministries use it to manage the youth population, and because many young people use it as a strategy for migration in the absence of educational and employment opportunities. Beyond that, the concept of sport Wade invokes here presumes a particular kind of subject and form of athletic contest. This scenario underscores, amongst the other issues, the curious way gender is central to postcolonial politics in Senegal—and not simply because policy failures, in this case, were blamed on the highest-ranking female political official in Senegalese history. Here, national success is equated with the athletic performance of an all-male cadre whose members, paradoxically, spend very little time in the country since they earn a living by playing for professional teams abroad. They are nevertheless valorized in collective aspirations for success. This perspective indexes the way masculinity is idealized in Senegal as harboring the power to free the nation from its postcolonial legacy of economic distress. This expectation is manifest in discourses about athletes competing for the national team and in other tropes through which concerns about local economic conditions are expressed. In exploring these issues, one wonders if it is important to
assess culpability as the stance of the Senegalese students suggests. In what sense is
Wade to blame for the nation’s economic woes?

The job drought that is the characteristic feature of Senegal’s economic
predicament has hit “youth” the hardest since more than 50% of the national population is
under the age of twenty. Thus youth are central to popular discourses about the relative
strength or weakness of the Senegalese state as the index *par excellence* of the
government’s ability to secure a future for the nation¹ (cf. Honwana and De Boeck 2005,
implicated in popular concerns with locating labor in the postcolony. But increasingly,
the repertoire of economic possibilities Senegalese subjects pursue has spread across the
globe (Diouf 2000, Carter 1997). And as a result of its chronic inability to create new
jobs, the Senegalese government has encouraged the labor migration that by now is so
pronounced remittances sent back from overseas constitute one of the largest incomes for
Senegalese families (Buggenhagen 2004). The migration includes radical student leaders
granted overseas scholarships to quell the local protest that has threatened to expose the
limitations of Senegal’s postcolonial political project (Ralph forthcoming). In this way,
Senegalese statecraft has been especially adept at defusing the subversive threat youth
pose. These intersecting dynamics structure the emotional and commercial trajectories
that characterize new international circuits emanating from neoliberal Senegal.

At the same time, because of normative ideas suggesting women are too valuable to
vacate the domestic sphere—but which de-value them by naturalizing their social
positions—the overseas labor migration is overwhelmingly male. Thus, to the extent that

¹ As evidence for the way the “actual condition of youth” is used to gauge social progress consider
the Conseil Économique et Social du Sénégal’s “Essai sur la Situation Actuelle de la Jeunesse.”
Senegalese subjects endorse international enterprise as the most feasible way to cope with prevailing conditions of economic stagnation, they misrecognize the problem of youth as one that only young men experience and the remedy as one only men slightly older can offer, whether referring to the government officials that create new policies, or the merchants, athletes, and musicians whose remittances sustain Senegalese households in times of economic distress.

"Neoliberalism"—the immediate political and economic context for these developments—is often theorized through practices promoted by government officials and state agencies (cf. Harvey 2005). Besides considering this important aspect of the phenomenon, this dissertation explores the way Senegalese actors promote and negotiate the salvific power of foreign capital and overseas commerce. Even more precisely, this project interrogates the widespread belief that such enterprise is most efficaciously pursued by a particular kind of citizen. Toward that end, I too examine the curious way masculine subjects are imagined as the solution to challenges in economic and social life despite the fact that most of the projects in which they are involved distance them from the domestic sphere taken to be the heart of Senegalese social life. And increasingly, it seems, the domestic sphere must be equated with the nation, as Senegalese men venture further afield in pursuit of the incomes expected to lessen financial burdens in the postcolony. But the immense psychological, cultural, and educational contributions of Senegalese subjects "at home" are consistently omitted from discourses about strategies that will empower the nation because these do not fit the heroic profile the Senegalese government and emissaries of foreign capital tout as the country's best "hope" for success.
This assumption about the characteristics efficacious actors possess surfaces as frequently in quotidian discourses about the informal tea lodges “lazy” men develop as in celebrations highlighting the success of the national football team abroad. A similar attitude is further evident among Senegalese basketball players competing for careers in Europe, North Africa, and the United States, encouraged by agents, scouts, and coaches who believe Senegalese players have a “natural” advantage over other athletes based on certain innate physical characteristics.

**Jumping through hoops to escape economic distress**

In 2005, I returned to Senegal for a third time, continuing my effort to explore the way Senegalese actors use sport to grapple with economic and political transformations occasioned by the onset of neoliberalism, the most recent installment of an economic history marked by four phases: a brief period of prosperity from independence in 1960 until the collapse of the nation’s agricultural sector by the early seventies; a subsequent period of intensified rural-to-urban labor migration that flooded cities with young men who hoped to secure work but rarely managed to do so; a tendency by the national government, from the mid-seventies onward, to experiment with different forms of structural adjustment to generate funds with which it might compensate for debts it incurred as a result of economic downturn; and a commitment, inaugurated in 1981 with the presidency of Abdou Diouf, then more explicitly under Abdoulaye Wade, to generate revenue primarily through gifts from donor countries and remittances sent back from Senegalese actors encouraged to leave the country in search of employment opportunities.

I was primarily interested in the way people understood the fact of chronic
unemployment, the drastic decrease in the value of local currency, and the government’s
tendency to stray from the socialist orientation that characterized it in the years
immediately following independence in favor of strategies to encourage foreign
investment and had noticed, by then, that sport provided a set of techniques for reckoning
with these changes, both for youth—the most significant social demographic, a group that
owed its existence to the material and emotional challenges people faced in trying to
reproduce Senegalese society—and for state actors, who encouraged young people with
few alternatives to pursue athletic competition as a way to build the kind of virtue they
recognize in the victories the national teams sometimes manage to achieve.

For the first time, I was able to speak with Bengali Kaba, a man who had earned
national recognition for the many free basketball clinics he had organized, over the years,
for young people in Dakar. Kaba was also now the head coach of the men’s team at
Senegal’s only basketball academy, SEED (Sport pour l’Education et le Développement
Economique) formed three years prior. One of my first questions was about his
impression of basketball’s significance in Senegalese society, especially for players who
pursue an interest in the sport. I was especially curious about what this interview might
reveal about this sport’s relationship with football and traditional wrestling—activities
widely acknowledged to be the nation’s two most popular forms of athletic contest.

Kaba responded by relaying a personal anecdote. Upon graduating from high
school (lycée) more than twenty-five years ago,² he left for France and joined a team

² Kaba was unable—or unwilling—to recall the exact year his professional career began. It is
unclear whether his amnesia was deliberate, but even if he was genuinely at a loss for detail, athletes more
generally tend to be whatever age they need to be for athletic competition. Many players from rural areas
were never registered at birth, anyway, so they often do not know their legal ages. Others take advantage
of this fact to position themselves for athletic opportunities. A player’s age, in other words, is sometimes
determined by that athlete’s skill level.
known as *Elan Béarnais Pau-Orthez*, of the *Ligue National de Basket* in France’s premier division (this European nation’s equivalent of the NBA). His teammates thought he was too small to play pro ball, Kaba recalls. But he shattered all doubt by scoring thirty-two points in the first game of the season. He proceeded to be a force on the team and throughout the league. His Head Coach’s brother presented Kaba with a framed portrait after one game saying, “When I see you, this is what I see.” The multi-colored canvas revealed a lion, dressed in the team’s uniform, dunking over opponents.

Kaba understood this symbol to mean he was king of the court, a fearless competitor. I considered this image to be a palimpsest of individual and national characteristics and believed as well that by using this story to frame his own experience and to convey the social significance of basketball in Senegal, Kaba proffered a complex statement on the sport’s relationship to Senegalese postcoloniality, and a particular “framing” of youth, sport, and transnationality that speaks to the way this category of actor, domain of activity, and geographic trajectory articulate with each other (Chapter 2).

For Kaba, basketball had been a passport to life in France, a strategy for migration. A young person who had experienced “poverty” and witnessed the demise of close friends and family as a result of economic hardship, he believed hardship gave him a competitive edge, “That’s why I could come to France and dominate. Because poverty makes us tough. Being poor made us strong.” In the form of the lion, Kaba attested to the rage born from a disenchantment with the legacy of a collapsed economy.

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3 Kaba is about 6’1’’. 7
The idea that an individual lion on the loose in France might constitute an implicit commentary on life in postcolonial Senegal is justified by the fact that this animal is the national mascot. *Les lions de teranga,* the men’s national football team, is by far the most famous. When it comes to athletics, football is the country’s primary preoccupation and a medium for gauging the success of the “entire nation”—as we have seen.

Still, while football provides the opportunity to support athletic endeavors that bolster the legitimacy of Senegalese governance, basketball outfits individual lions with the chance to transform their social position, to test their resilience in other parts of the world, and to develop “values” that will, ideally, guarantee success, even if athletic careers don’t pan out. Whatever the forum in which athletes pursue postcolonial hoop dreams, basketball in Senegal is rather more privat(iz)e(d) than football. With few exceptions, courts are maintained on school campuses and at recreational facilities monitored by security. Besides being one such venue, SEED has the distinction of being one of only two indoor basketball facilities in the entire country.

But the SEED project, to which I return in chapter 4, receives sustained attention in the dissertation for an additional reason that, when considered alongside some of the issues already discussed, it forms a fascinating entry into my ethnographic investigation. The problem to which I allude can, perhaps, be captured concisely by borrowing a

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4 Literally, “the lions of hospitality,” a pun that turns on the Wolof word for its native custom of caring for guests and visitors. One might say it is a tongue-in-cheek reference to the “hospitality” the lions serve their opponents in athletic competition.

The phrase also has a patriotic resonance: however ferocious the lions may be they are from Senegal, a nation known the world over for its hospitality.

5 Billy Niagne, who also played professionally in France, once commented, “Basketball m'a donné le valeur” [Basketball gave me values].” In the semantic ambiguity of valeur, one gleans—besides the obvious associations with honor and discipline—a sense of the symbolic capital that occasionally translates into economic value for select athletes.
question I pose in the manuscript: If the SEED acronym represents its commitment to use
sport for l'éducation et le développement économique, why doesn’t the organization go
by SEDE? SEED—Sport for Education and Economic Development—only works in
English.

This dissertation explores Senegal’s current labor crisis through a sustained
historical and ethnographic study of 1) a government that claims the recent success of the
national football team as evidence of its own efficacy despite being famously
unsuccessful at resolving the nation’s economic woes, and 2) youth determined to escape
chronic unemployment by playing for professional teams abroad. This project, while
situated in Senegal, is very much concerned with the way the nation’s postcolonial
political agenda has shifted from an initial emphasis on ties with France to one marked by
the increased effort to secure investments from the United States government and
corporations therein. Simultaneously, the U.S. has become increasingly significant as a
destination for Senegalese youth who hope to escape their nation’s employment vacuum
by establishing diasporic networks with players in that locale.

I am primarily concerned with understanding what happens when economically
marginalized subjects use the limited resources at their disposal to petition for better social
standing: in contemporary Senegal, this is true for “youth” and “state” officials alike since
both are convinced that harnessing athletic abilities makes them eligible for the pursuit of
increased prosperity, and both expect social transformations to occur based on their proximity
to international networks. Yet while state officials use football to unify the nation, project an
image of virility, and align the country with its vision of African neoliberalism, youth are now
especially interested in using basketball to build careers, taking advantage of the transnational
corporations and NBA teams that have developed a recent interest in this west African locale. And even though the two sports follow different trajectories, these postcolonial hoop dreams parallel the government’s new interest in cultivating relationships with the United States and other countries it believes will assist its neoliberal aspirations. As my dissertation shows, basketball, like football, is implicated in the nation’s postcolonial political imaginary. By understanding how this ideology is created and sustained in state discourses, conversations with unemployed youth, and the testimony of ballplayers who play in professional leagues overseas, I explore the techniques and strategies through which subjects use the skills at their disposal—or the traits with which they believe they have been blessed—to take advantage of the confluence of institutional resources at play in the Senegalese postcolony.

Theoretical concerns and ethnographic issues

At play

one’s leisure time (cf. Kelley 1997). When combining these insights, one gets the impression
play falls somewhere between sleep and sport—but well beneath work—on the institutional
hierarchy of human activity. Despite this categorization, the idea that play marks a discrete
enterprise remains difficult to defend. After all, what does it mean that people “play sports”?
That we speak—as I have already—of different factors “at play”? Anne Allison’s (2006: 29)
recent ethnography of toys and video games in Japan discusses the way play “work[s]” to
construct social fantasies, in part, through the commodification of recreational media. In this
line of inquiry play—despite referring to varied pursuits—retains its typical sense of being
something in which primarily children are engaged.

Still, if play marks the space of freedom and fantasy, it should perhaps not be viewed
exclusively as the antithesis of work. Instead, it might also include the sense that
accompanies hyper-production that one has the power to shape and mold one’s destiny—an
idea many associate with entertainers, athletes and, even, real estate developers: “play as the
ideal of him who is overfull with strength, as childlike” but less a characteristic of babes and
more the unrestrained and temperamental, creative, “childlikeness of God” (Nietzsche
1968[1886-1888]: 797; see also Love 1986: 172).

In other words, the sense of freedom and possibility that accompanies an actor in a
particular pursuit structures the quality of her experience. To capture this sense, I borrow
from a different anthropological discourse whose theoretical lessons are apropos.

Linguistic anthropologists realize that speaking patterns are structured by attitudes
toward and perceptions of a language and its’ speakers, and they refer to these variables as
linguistic ideologies (cf. Schieffelin, Woolard, and Kroskity 2000, Irvine and Gal 2000,
Gal 1998). If, indeed, the concept of "language ideology...allows us to relate the microculture of communicative action to political economic considerations of power and social inequality, to confront macrosocial constraints on language behavior, and to connect discourse with lived experiences" (Woolard 1998), it is my contention that the concept of "ludic ideology" is similarly illuminating with regard to the personal experiences and historical consequences that result from different kinds of social action. After all, attitudes toward different forms of social activity are structured, in part, by perceptions of difficulty, of appropriateness for certain groups (based on dynamics associated with race, gender, class, sexual preference and religion). Thus, this dissertation seeks to chart the conditions under which certain forms of activity (football, basketball, neoliberal economic strategies) become appropriate as techniques for fulfilling economic and social aspirations and the attitudes that accompany these enterprises. I do this by using the concept of play—or, more precisely, an idea of the ludic—as a way to understand the associations people make and how these structure the particular kinds of pursuits in which they engage.

Given the diverse conditions under which ludic ideologies are engaged, this dissertation uses anthropological theories of value to understand how people reckon with diverse forms of activity. In my view, all social activity is productive (Graeber 2001, Munn 1996), although each course of action yields unique social consequences (Marx 1992[1887]: 76). By taking an inclusive stance toward the repertoire of strategies Senegalese actors might deploy to reposition themselves, I seek to gain ethnographic perspective and theoretical insight concerning the conditions under which ludic ideologies emerge as a way to wrestle with the contradictions of Senegalese neoliberalism; often quite literally—the national government characterizes its effort to battle the nation’s labor problem as a lutte or “fight”
against unemployment. This terminology, admittedly, appears common across nation-states but, when coupled with the fact that le lutte traditional (traditional wrestling) is a national sport, one gets the impression athletic competition is now ever more prominent as a way to grapple with the contradictions of neoliberalism. And vice versa.

This is a recent development. Among other things, this dissertation shows that ideas of the ludic furnish optimal strategies for migration, political maneuvering, and financial engineering that remain consistent with, and which were born from, the neoliberal moment, especially (though not only) a state bureaucracy ever more open to agile entrepreneurs.

Previously, as scholars have demonstrated, Senegal’s socialist infrastructure ensured that employment, when available, was guaranteed by the national government and its industries (Fatton 1981). And before entering the civil sector—or at least in their early years, when they were ideologically distanced from it—children were raised in concert with family traditions that were often gerontocratic, and usually defined by patriarchal authority (Diouf 2005). As youth moved into urban areas in search of work and extended beyond the purview of traditional eldership, they developed new possibilities for generating income and for artistic expression that no longer relied on such well-recognized institutional processes (Diagne 2002, Diouf 1996). While Senegalese musicians were once produced by particular caste groups, for instance, the advent of local rap music industries have democratized processes of musical production (Ralph forthcoming). Another example might be the fact that families, now more frequently, accept having young women attend school overseas or play sports beyond adolescence in the pursuit of professional careers (Arab 2002) since the depressed economy makes the prospect of marriage ever more distant in a society that recognizes the economic standing of the male suitor as the most essential prerequisite for nuptial legitimacy.
But making sense of the historical conditions that have given rise to these processes requires that I elaborate even further the theoretical tools deployed throughout this dissertation. As stated, I am primarily interested in understanding how youth and state actors use (techniques of play captured in the idea of) sport to wrestle with neoliberalism, and how youth—as icons of aspiration—are sometimes inadvertently commodified in attempts to project an image of the actors considered most fit to pursue new commercial opportunities. To sort these concerns, I combine several literatures. These are discussed in terms of their appropriateness for this investigation in what follows.

The "global" to the "-ization"

James Ferguson opens the first chapter of his 2006 book *Global Shadows* by questioning the dearth of research—or even sophisticated commentary on—globalization in Africa. By use of this term, I am referring to historical processes that include the increasingly rapid circulation of finance capital (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001, Appadurai 1996), new destinations for and rates of migration (Hoogvelt 2001, Diouf 2000, Ong 2003), new forms of information technology that link previously disconnected territories (Appadurai 1996), the outsourcing of labor from advanced to lesser capitalist societies (or, the re-industrialization of certain countries during a period of alleged post-industrialism in others; cf. Comaroff and Comaroff 2000), new international networks that build upon but are different from previous ones (Trouillot 2003, Cooper 2001), and—most of all—the profound sense that all of these developments have fundamentally altered the constitution of the world we knew (Mazzarella 2003, Turner 2003).
Ferguson justifiably finds it curious that any account of a global process could overlook a “continent of some 800 million people that takes up fully 20 percent of the planet’s land mass” (Ferguson 2006: 25). He reasons they have done so because, unlike “Asian tigers and Southeast Asian dragons,” Africa can hardly confirm the triumph of a global economic order. In fact, for Ferguson, Africa has little to offer either globalization’s “boosters” or “detractors” since few countries on the continent have prospered in the era of globalization and those who have failed have not struggled because they are overrun with “Western factories and consumer goods” (Ferguson: 26).

While it is indeed interesting to note the globalization literature has little to say about a continent that is one of the world’s most important regions (in terms of sheer population, geopolitical significance, and economic resources), it seems worthwhile to consider reasons besides those Ferguson cites. Because while Ferguson is correct to suggest that Africa has little to offer globalization’s uncritical friends, on one hand, and foes, on the other, it is worth mentioning that even the most sophisticated academic discourses on globalization fail to mention the African continent. Beyond that, scholars have produced important work on historical transformations occurring in different parts of the world that implicate Africa, yet what they write could hardly be considered part of the globalization discourse—another curious development.

One reason there is no sophisticated discourse on globalization by Africanists is that many senior scholars have rightfully regarded the concept suspiciously. In a 2001 article, Frederick Cooper poses the question: What is the concept of globalization good for? According to his article, the only legitimate answers would be nothing or, at least, not much. In Cooper’s view, many of the developments people associate with
globalization have been taking place for some time (cf. Trouillot 2003). What must be theorized then, in his view, are the new circuits and networks that have arisen in the present moment. We cannot, in other words, assume that the world has either become more closely connected (the global-) or that this process is ongoing (the –ization): these are the two main conceptual limitations of the globalization concept as far as he is concerned (Cooper 2001). The new patterns we aim to theorize, he contends, cannot be captured by this concept.

And yet what Cooper’s insight points to, really, requires a distinction between globalization as an heuristic device and globalization’s status as a social fact. For many people, something they call “globalization” has fundamentally altered previous forms of sociality (Mazzarella 2003, Soros 2002, Appadurai 1996: 3, 36). This belief, when mapped onto concrete changes in the scale and intensity of the processes Cooper would have us outline, requires us to address this phenomenal form in terms of the way people understand it to be taking place whether or not—from an ostensibly “objective” and scholarly scientific standpoint—analysts agree. In other words, the key seems to be not whether or not the world has indeed changed in the way that everyone understands it, but rather that so many people share the sense that the world is dramatically different from the way it once was. Analysts, of course, must be careful not to share the same unfounded anxieties suffered by some members of populations they study, which is this is the crucial lesson in Cooper’s argument. Thus as long as scholars speaking about “globalization” do so with attention to its historical particulars, unique sociological configurations, and attendant cultural mediations, one can theorize the social
developments that accompany use of this term without undermining one’s claims by way of a systematic oversight.

One could look at matters from another angle as well. While Cooper is right to note that globalization does sometimes imply a teleology, in another sense, it is a domain of lived experience.\(^6\) It could be understood as a moment in which we exist, and not one that most people expect to be transcended any time soon.\(^7\) In other words, as I have suggested by referring to it as a historical predicament, it is a form of present experience that shapes the contours of lived realities in the world (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000) and must be theorized accordingly (Harvey 2002; Jameson and Miyoshi, eds., 1998).

But Ferguson’s claim is so interesting to consider because while few Africanists have discussed “globalization” in meaningful ways, scholars working in this part of the world have produced sophisticated analyses of economic transformation and historical change in transnational contexts (cf. De Boeck and Plissart 2006, Cole 2006, Comaroff and Comaroff 2000). The difference between some of these studies and the literature on globalization is not that Africanists have overlooked these trends but that attempts to investigate them typically proceed from a sophisticated ethnography of local conditions or a nuanced study of shifting historical circumstances. In that regard, it could—and should—be argued that Africanists have developed an important tradition for reckoning

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\(^6\) In most discussions of globalization, in other words, it discussed as a matter-of-fact. This suggests the extent to which, for most people, it is something real (cf. Stiglitz 2003, Soros 2002, Hoogvelt 2001).

\(^7\) One of the strongest arguments for a contemporary economic predicament that is here to stay finds its expression in the work of Francis Fukuyama (1992) who argues this moment in capitalism constitutes the end of history, at least the end of feasible alternatives, thanks to the end of the Cold War. In its haste to abandon the socialism that formed the initial framework for postcoloniality, the Senegalese government seems to have embraced a like disposition. What makes neoliberalism unique, then, is not that it constitutes the “end of history” as such but that it signals the end of utopian aspirations; in Senegal, these once integrated socialism and nationalism. This stance has been abdicated in favor of a neoliberalism achieved through internationalism.
with “global transformation.” One important feature of this discourse, though, is that most of the studies refer to the current historical period, not as the “era of globalization,” but as a “neoliberal” age. Still, this is a designation that, in my view, more astutely captures what is at stake for anthropologists and the social landscapes they seek to chart.

_Africa in the neoliberal world order_

Concerned with patterns like the odd way “hyperrationalization” had become hitched to “the exuberant spread of innovative occult practices and money magic,” Jean and John Comaroff published, in 2000, an essay entitled “Millenial Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism.” Though Comaroff and Comaroff (2000: 291-293) set out to explore the intricacies and idiosyncrasies of a newfangled “capitalism that presents itself as a gospel of salvation,” they also remained concerned with certain increases in civic and civil strife, besides also querying the conditions under which labor—once the primary category for producing economic value—now seemed disarticulated from the chimerical quality of new schemes to privatize risk. In this regard, their intellectual interests overlap with scholars ostensibly working on issues of globalization who were likewise concerned with the increasingly spectral quality of finance capital (cf. Davis 2003). Yet referring to neoliberalism as a constellation of cultural beliefs has the advantage of encouraging analysts to appreciate the way its techniques and tendencies legitimately structure life worlds even as they render disastrous consequences for most of the world’s people. One of the most vexing problems with the literature of globalization is that it is often unclear whether social scientists are critiquing globalization claims or condoning them; one hardly ever knows whether writers view the term as referring to something actually existing in the world or as a tentative framework for understanding a social phenomena
that cannot be reduced to the claims of those who advocate the presence of, for instance, transnational corporations in peripheral economies.

An additional advantage of the work on neoliberalism is that analysts explicitly recognize it as a momentary phase in the history of capital: for that reason, critics tend not to understand it as the culmination of anything and instead explore its contours which are, in this literature, understood to be historically contingent. Further, many authors have keyed into the violence that accompanies transition to a neoliberal economy (Shamar and Kumar 2003).^8

Interestingly, despite Ferguson's efforts to orient *Global Shadows* as, in part, a discussion of globalization in Africa, his subtitle—"Africa in a neoliberal world order"—is even more faithful to the literature that anchors his critique and the discourse for which his work is so valuable. It is not simply a critique of globalization working in different regions across disciplines—(Thomas 2004, Davis 2003)—but also with Africanists who have discovered similar historical trends (Cole 2005, Elyachar 2005, Soares 2004).

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^8^ This despite Elyachar's incredible claim that the "invisible hand of the market is usually imposed not through violence but rather through more subtle processes." In her view "the particular way that the free market has been imposed on Iraq," for instance, "is not typical of neoliberalism" (Elyachar 2005: 6). Evidence from Senegal, however, contradicts this claim (especially the events discussed in Chapter 2). Moreover, it seems to me curiously consistent with the logic of neoliberalism to contend that free markets seldom require violent imposition (as, for instance, Wheelan (2002) argues, unconvincingly).

^9^ It also borrows from Jean and John Comaroff who, on several occasions, had used similar terminology. See, as a representative example, "Notes on Afrimodernity and the neo world order," (Comaroff and Comaroff 2004) in the collection Brad Weiss (2004) edited.
Senegalese neoliberalism, in particular, is structured by a distinct and paradoxical form of political exceptionalism: the nation earns accolades for being an African government that, uncharacteristically, retains the features of a democracy despite the fact that its legitimacy stems, in part, from the nation’s tendency to position itself in political alliances hostile to the interests of most African countries (as I discuss in Chapter 2). In a context of economic marginalization at the level of nation and society, the Senegalese government and many of its people seek to attract investment capital by highlighting the natural characteristics they ostensibly possess, which make them different from other countries and peoples elsewhere. This effort to capitalize upon one’s innate differences is a prominent feature of the neoliberal predicament.

*The essence of Senegalese neoliberalism*

William Mazzarella, in his 2003 book, *Shoveling Smoke*, discusses how Indian advertising agents draw on local ideas of Indianness in the quest to create an audience amenable to commodities they aspire to market. With exquisite ethnographic detail, he recounts the steps taken, for instance, to convince the people of India that local Coca-Cola products and Karma Sutra condoms index recognizable cultural idiosyncrasies.

Though the characters and events that motivate this scenario are responding to unique historical circumstances, this attitude that one can market one’s most essential cultural attributes—one’s cultural essence—is rather more widespread, and extends beyond the body of the individual to aspects a group—or ethnic—identity, and even to knowledge passed down within constituencies across generations. Indeed, one could almost argue that, in many parts of neoliberal Africa, “the sale of culture seems, in part, to have replaced the sale of labor power” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006: 2).
Senegalese athletes often discuss their proximity to African Americans as a reason why they expect to succeed in vocations for which their black American counterparts have achieved renown. When asked why they choose to pursue careers in basketball, interviewee responses included references to their “rhythm,” “black skin,” “jumping ability,” and “body type” (Chapters 3 & 4). Part of my research is concerned with the specific ideas that motivate young athletes (especially men) with sparse economic resources to use their bodies as a means of producing economic and symbolic value. But it is admittedly unusual for an ethnographic study to focus on a particular generational grade of a population rather than some specific ethnic group or cultural community. To explain why my project assumes these specific contours, I discuss my target demographic, in further detail, in the section to follow.

*The production of youth in postcolonial Senegal*

Senegal’s present rate of unemployment is 48%, and urban youth make up 40% of that figure.10 Urban Senegal is, most frequently, where the social tensions occasioned by this escalating youth population are played out. The migration of unemployed youth inaugurated by 1960s agricultural collapse persists almost uninterrupted into the present (Harsch 2001, Diouf 1996: 230).

But as the term “youth” can range from adolescence well into stages commonly associated with adulthood, its analytic use must be specified. In postcolonial Africa, the designation “youth” is often reserved for those people (usually men) who are not yet tied into forms of social reproduction (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000, Durham 2000). In

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Senegal, youth tend toward one of two categories: 1) “products of the rural exodus,” school dropouts, merchants, and “beggars,” and 2) graduates from high schools, colleges, and universities who are still unable to secure employment (Diouf 1996: 230-231). In both instances, the designation is reserved for those who have not yet been incorporated into the ranks of mature sociality: those who are unmarried and relatively uneducated. “Youth” refers to those who have failed, in one way or another, to achieve socially recognized respectability.

Youth across the continent of Africa share the distinction of being unmoored from well-recognized mechanisms of social reproduction (Weiss 2005). Under diverse conditions of political contestation, famine, and economic stagnation, they improvise ways out of social liminality (De Boeck 2006, Honwana and De Boeck 2005, Honwana 2005). Elsewhere, they seize upon the freedom associated with being unwelcome, unrecognized, and unmonitored to participate in the illicit economies now present as a result of the same economic transformations that have left youth disarticulated from the education and employment opportunities once present in Senegalese society (Buggenhagen 2005, Bathily, Diouf, and Mbojd 1995).

For my purposes, it is especially interesting that the literature on youth in Africa gained momentum in the 1990s, during the same period when Senegalese unemployment rates reached crisis proportions, and in the same moment when young people launched spectacular critiques of the postcolonial predicament (cf. De Boeck 1999a, 199b, Remes 1999, Drucker-Brown, S. 1999, Dodge C.P. & Raundalen, M., eds. 1991, Honwana

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One might consider as evidence of this conjuncture Mamadou Diouf’s 1996 *Public Culture* article, “Urban Youth and Senegalese Politics: Dakar 1988-1994,” which showed how young people in Senegal expressed their discontent with political stagnation at times by scribbling political graffiti on decaying walls and by setting urban parks and at others by launching campaigns for cleanliness, the unsteady character of contestation attesting to the contradictions that structure the predicament of youth.

Since it would be naïve to suggest that because of new opportunities present in the neoliberal era, African youth are bound to prevail or, conversely, that because of the constraints they encounter, they are likely to perish, I am interested in the improvisational quality of youth culture—in the repertoire of techniques they fashion to achieve mobility, pursue financial security, and develop political critiques (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000). To account for this inventiveness, I am especially interested in the conditions under which the youth—who no longer enjoy the security of childhood or the responsibilities of adulthood—experience this period in life as one characterized by play, as a moment defined by possibility.

This concern with the destiny of Senegalese youth is a central theme of this dissertation—whether I am dealing expressly with ideas youth themselves possess, or with actors who seek to harness young people as a potential resource. “(At) Play in the Postcolony” considers diverse sets of ethnographic experience and historical evidence to outline the contours of Senegalese strategies for making sense of the idea that opportunities are now available in a way unlike any previous moment in the nation’s

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11 Achille Mbembe (1985), of course, deserves credit for exploring the relationship between “youth” and the “political order” in Africa even before.
history. In that way, the quest to claim opportunities occasioned by a borderless age, the fantasy of free market triumph, and the promise of independence converge to create a heightened sense of freedom unlike any moment in recent history.

“Postcolonial” is, thus, a flexible adjective meant to capture some ambivalences prominent in the present. This is especially true for the offspring of the generation that witnessed the birth of the Senegalese nation-state, which now finds itself coping with unprecedented economic crisis and political stagnation despite having been reared on the idea that the country is now unhinged from an oppressive past. In this moment, new commercial opportunities have become available that encourage them to turn away from the former colonial metropole for opportunities to labor elsewhere, while they fashion a new hierarchy of international destinations atop of which sits the United States. As mentioned, I mobilize the anthropological literature on value as my primary theoretical apparatus. But, as value theory has been criticized for overlooking, or underspecifying, the political issues and historical constraints that structure economic opportunities (Hann, ed. 1998), I feel compelled to further elaborate my conceptual apparatus.

*Value theory, revisited*

The concept of value, while crucial to my analytic, is difficult to theorize with reliability and precision. If one follows the discourse of classical economists, it has a very specific valence, being the end result and index of a person’s maximizing self-interest (Whitaker 1904, Menon 1960, Young 1978). The robust anthropological tradition of value theory has posed a formidable challenge to this paradigm (Sangren 2000, Munn 1986, Appadurai 1986, Turner 1984), proposing alternate “standards of value” (Graeber 2005: 411) as the basis of a more holistic heuristic inquiry. And yet, this trend, while incredibly
useful for elaborating the means by which new social networks become articulated (Munn 1986, Turner 1984), has sometimes made the concept of “value” so vacuous it is almost impossible to pin down analytically.12

Add to this Rabinbach’s (1990) claim that theories of value reproduce the dubious 19th century belief that civil society is simply the product of human energy, or Arbeitskraft (which Marx and others translated into the concept of labor-power), and one might not see any merit at all in using the concept.13

However, this emphasis on the creative potential of human energy turns out to be value’s strength in the ethnographic scenario that concerns us here.14 For, in this case, the analyst needs a concept that can explain the way creative action works to articulate new social networks (Graeber 2001). Following a specific anthropological tradition, I define value as the content of productive activity transformed into a category of meaning that links a total system of production (Turner 1984). Doing so prepares me to show how youth leisure constitutes a network of unemployed Senegalese youth drawn into a sphere

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12 Consider this passage from a special issue of Cultural Anthropology entitled, “Value in Circulation,” which captures the elastic quality of “value” in anthropological parlance:

[T]he category [of value] has been used in varied ways to illuminate ethical, economic, aesthetic, logical, linguistic, and political dimensions of human life... Value is about measure or meaning; it is material or symbolic, secular or sacred, abstract or concrete, individual or collective, qualitative or quantitative, global or local... (Eiss and Pedersen 2002).

13 The concept of value is tied to the development of 19th century thermodynamics and theories about the conservation of energy developed, most prominently, by Herman von Helmholtz. For Helmholtz, energy could not be created out of nothing, it could only be transferred from one form to the next. Based upon this insight, he coined the term Arbeitskraft for the smallest detectable unit of force (Rabinbach 1990: 55)

14 And, the fact that such a notion has its basis in 19th century mechanics need not invalidate this perspective or serve as the sole basis upon which a theory of “creative action” (Graeber 2001) can be constituted. Productive activity always begins with actors’ efforts to reorganize their worlds. This invariably involves the expenditure of something like human energy in the transformation of existing circumstances.

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where basketball fashions and knowledge are highly coveted and lay the basis for new social hierarchies. It also prepares me to evaluate youth who hope to “make it” in the world of professional sports: how practices associated with these aspirations “articulate” (Hall 1980) new relationships with families, peers, and global basketball markets.

Further, the forms of value production described here help me describe how youth are situated with respect to institutionalized forms of labor. As a sphere constituted by creative action, value links the endeavors of differentially situated actors so I can elaborate the systemic effects of their efforts (Graeber 2001, Munn 1986, Elson 1979).

For this dissertation, I am primarily interested in locating the material forms in which diverse forms of value cohere. Anthropological uses of value theory explore production in pre-capitalist or non-capitalist economic spheres (Munn 1996, Turner 1984, Graeber 2001); the unstable tension between the symbolic and economic dimensions of contemporary markets (Allison 2006, Stallybrass 1998, Cassanelli 1986, Davenport 1986, Geary 1986, Gell 1986); and the products of labor (Mazzarella 2003, Bayly 1986)—production of laborers (Fisher 2006)—in capitalist societies. Building on the strand in this literature concerned with the material forms in which productive activity congeals, I am interested in the way different regimes of value become sutured in objects (or, more precisely, in objectified social forms, since not all crystallizations of value would be recognizable as discrete entities, as I discuss in chapter 4). In other words, I am fascinated by phenomena that fall within the category of “fetish.”

The concept of the fetish, as we know, first emerged in a coastal trading region of west Africa during the fifteenth century (Kaplan 1991). The pidgin term *fetisso* was born from the frustrated attempts of Portuguese merchants trying to understand African
(mis)uses of gold statuettes and other artifacts that held monetary value for these traders, but which seemed—from their perspective—to simply house ideas of the sacred for their New World counterparts (Kaplan 2006: 2). Nevertheless, in their claims that African actors misunderstood emerging ideas of capitalist value these Portuguese middlemen offer ethnographic insights about the way Africans unified two seemingly distinct worlds: the domain of mystical belief and the sphere of international commerce, where social value collided with new economic configurations (Pietz 1985: 7). For this particular way the idea of the fetish captures the collision between two different regimes of value, I find it to be a useful heuristic device.

My understanding of the way value is produced from local ritualized activity owes much to Graeber (2001), especially his claim that value is created not exclusively as by-product “labor” in the strictest sense but through “creative action” that “produces social relations and in doing so transforms the producers themselves” (2001: 59). My take on the way value becomes congealed in material form, though, proceeds along a rather different course, as I will show through a discussion of Graeber’s recent attempt to grapple with the concept of the fetish. I discuss Graeber’s intervention at length since much of his argument hinges on a critique of Pietz, who I follow most closely in theorizing the intersection of conflicting value standards that assume the form of a fetish.

The problem of the fetish

In his essay, “Fetishism as social creativity,” David Graeber (2005: 407-438) sets out to resolve a paradox that, in his view, has plagued social theory: if indeed, as Karl Marx suggests, human beings ideally conceive objects in their imaginations before they produce them, why can’t they imagine the way revolutionary social change will proceed
(408)? In Graeber’s view, Marx foreclosed the idea that human beings can conceive of a
plan to transform before doing so.

Graeber attempts to resolve this alleged conundrum by advancing the argument
that a fetish is the form through which people conceptualize their ability to create new
relationships. In the argument he outlines, fetishes figure prominently in efforts to
fashion new social phenomena—in particular new gods—from scratch.

In making this claim, Graeber draws primarily from three sources: 1) his own
fieldwork in Madagascar, 2) an earlier tradition of ethnographic work on African
“fetishes,” and 3) the intellectual oeuvre of William Pietz. Graeber makes extensive use
of a passage from Pietz where he discusses the idea—widespread among Europeans of
the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries—that New World ideas of the sacred were so
superficially serendipitous it seemed as if an African went around, willy-nilly, lending a
spiritual embrace to almost any object or trifle that caught her fancy. For Graeber, from
within this ethnocentric claim one can glean the ethnographic fact that fetishes function
primarily to enact new social relations and appear most prominently in moments when
people construct new deities. As evidence for his conclusion, Graeber leans on the idea
that Marx understood fetishes as objects that people create but which they nevertheless
misrecognize as having power over them.

From the standpoint of the intervention I hope to make regarding fetishes,
Graeber’s argument has several limitations that, in the interest of brevity, I list here in
serial form:¹⁵

¹⁵ To these one could add the following criticism: given that Marx develops the idea of the fetish
as part of the first installment in his three-volume critique of capital (1992[1887]) one must defend the
decision to use this aspect of his economic theory to resolve a tension in his political program. It is not
Graeber’s rendition of fetishism in the Marxist tradition—"We create things, and then, because we don’t understand how we did it, we end up treating our creations as if they had power over us" (411)—is truncated. Marx also believed a fetish—such as the commodity fetish—was an object (or, more precisely, an objectified social form) that housed a dialectic between use-value and exchange-value at its core (Marx 1992[1887]:76, see also Mazzarella 2003: 20). But without this additional emphasis, Graeber settles for insisting fetishism occurs when “We fall down and worship that which we ourselves have made” (411).

The idea that fetishism is (solely) characterized by subjective misrecognition leads Graeber to conclude that “European visitors to Africa....were, at least from the African perspective, remarkably little fetishized” (411). For me it isn’t even worthwhile to speak about degrees of fetishization. The term “fetish” might refer to 1) a category of objects, 2) a particular object, or 3) an entire society characterized by mystical notions taken to be scientific truths and forms of production from which people became alienated. And although one can speak of fetishization as a process that has in fact occurred, it is not clear to me how one fetish might be more or less a fetish than its counterpart. I suspect that Graeber reaches this position because he strays rather dramatically from the issue that is of primary importance to Pietz: that a fetish appears in efforts to negotiate different regimes of value and that it successfully captures them in material form. Instead, Graeber charges Pietz with failing to discuss what he considers to be most important about fetishes: that they figure prominently in efforts to create new social relationships.

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clear how one might move seamlessly from the former to the latter and began again since his theoretical work in these distinct veins are entirely of a different order and scale. Marx’s economic theory was, in an important sense, a theoretical and ethnographic treatment of 19th century British industrial capitalism (Ollman 2003, Turner 1984), which naturally would differ from any effort to theorize a utopian alternative to capitalist exploitation.
Pietz, to the contrary, discusses at length the means by which African and European traders used blood-drenched objects and amulets in ad hoc rituals through which they secured trade relationships—commercial and affective networks of various kinds. There may be oversights in the argument Pietz develops, but this is not one of them. It is true that he doesn’t take the argument far enough for Graeber, but that is because the latter scholar is invested in a rather different claim. Graeber’s claim hinges on the idea that, in the same moment where the idea of the fetish emerged in a trading zone off the coast of west Africa, Europeans were developing theories of social contract that paralleled ideas prominent in Africa at the same time. This claim is sufficiently ambitious to warrant our patience and suspension of disbelief. The account Graeber provides is nevertheless unconvincing because his argument that Africans were engaged in nascent forms of social contract even before Europeans arrived rests on a dubious generalization that collapses under the weight of critical scrutiny.

Graeber claims that Pietz only discusses European ideas of the fetish and gives no account of what Africans might have been thinking. In order to make his own case for the existence of African social contract theory, Graeber draws from what he considers

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16 Never mind that in a footnote to that criticism Graeber cites, as an exception to it (2005: 433, n.6), two Pietz articles (1995a, 1995b) where the writer, indeed, discusses African ideas of blood sacrifice. Graeber brushes this fact aside by suggesting “these essays... are concerned with a later historical period, and somewhat different sorts of questions.” It is nevertheless curious that he fails to discuss them, especially since in an article entitled, “The Fetish of Civilization: Sacrificial Blood and Monetary Debt,” (which builds on the two 1995 essays Graebers cites above) Pietz makes a claim that directly contradicts a fundamental premise of Graeber’s fetish essay. Compare Pietz’s sense that “Christian ideas are poor guides for understanding West African religious practices (Pietz 2000: 70),” with the following passage by Graeber: “For someone brought up in a religious environment largely shaped by Christianity, moving from the cosmic- logical systems of Oceania or North America to Africa is moving from very alien to far more familiar territory. It is not just that throughout Africa one can find mythological topos (the Garden of Eden, the Tower of Babel) familiar from the Old Testament, that just do not seem to be present in other traditions. There is a sense that African theologians seem to be asking mostly the same existential questions... It was the underlying affinity, I suspect, which accounted for the common European reaction of shocked revulsion and dismay on being exposed to so many aspects of African ritual...” (Graeber 2005: 414-15).
to be, “a pretty voluminous literature on...the sorts of objects” Europeans called fetishes “as well as on African cosmological systems more generally” (414). By consulting these literatures, Graeber contends, “one can make some pretty good guesses as to what Africans who owned and used such objects were about.” Graeber concedes that he is dabbling in “unwarranted generalizations” (414) and that “terms like ‘Africa’, ‘Europe’, and ‘the West’, are fuzzy at best and probably meaningless” (415). He nevertheless proceeds to unfold his argument using precisely this level of specificity: he moves quickly through his own work on Malagasy “rituals of affliction,” Victor Turner’s work on the Ndembu of Zambia, Wyatt MacGaffey’s work on the BaKongo, and ethnographic studies of the Tiv people who inhabit central Nigeria (415-420). His assurances that this last group “lived not too far from the region dealt with in Pietz’s texts” do not, to me, validate this manner of bricolage.

Graeber finds that these groups share rituals that require ingesting or constructing fetishes. In making his case, he cites specific references to this term in order to justify his position. But if, indeed, as Pietz and others suggest, the term “fetish” emerged as part of the way Europeans failed to understand African uses of sacred objects, it is unlikely that Africans would—already, as the modern period was being constituted—have an ideological investment in a concept that was clearly foreign to their indigenous practices, a term that was at best a means by which they gauged the boundaries between their own changing traditions and those of cultural outsiders.17

17 To defend his claim that Africans already operated with a kind of social contract theory, Graeber cites a passage from William Bosman (1667[1705], as cited in Graeber 2005: 425): “If any Obligation is to be confirmed, their Phrase is, let us as a farther Confirmation make Fetiche’s...” It is clear that fetishes of a kind were routinely used to seal agreements, but whether African commerçants would make such a declaration before doing so remains difficult to prove simply by citing a passage such as this one. What’s more, it is not at all clear that whatever the people of the Guinea coast attempted to “further”
Graeber never explains why fetishes used to constitute social relations between Africans—or between Africans and Europeans—can’t simply function as a way to erect social compacts or solidify commercial circuits or seal obligations: there is no explanation about why they must map more or less perfectly onto European social contract theory.

Anthropologists do—and should—borrow insights from disparate cases to fashion new theoretical arguments. Yet, they must be careful and discerning when they do so. Because ultimately Graeber’s argument (that these various African societies all deploy similar types of fetishes to form social contracts in a tradition they share not only with each other but also with “Europeans” of the same period) is only convincing because he operates at such a level of generality it is difficult to disprove his claims. The problem is that his position is equally difficult to defend.

This, finally, is the most curious aspect of Graeber’s argument—the point on which he and I differ most dramatically.

Graeber takes Pietz to task for not recognizing that African uses of the fetish primarily functioned as a form of “social creativity” (an odd claim, given that everything people construct evidences social creativity). As part of this argument he lends credence to the idea that Africans create new gods all the time. Rather than attributing this notion to some errant ethnocentric fantasy (where, I suspect, it rightfully belongs), Graeber insists this is where the power of the fetish lies: it evidences the creative capacity of human beings, especially the ability to construct new objects in which we might invest our spiritual energy. For Graeber, the essential issue is that we can never have a

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here by making fetishes is the same thing as what the Tiv, Bakongo, Ndembu, and Malagasy people aspire to do in their disparate ritual traditions.

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complete grasp over our creations. Recall, a key part of his argument is that what we produce necessarily spins out of our control, then comes back to haunt us. As a result, we can only worship what we neglect to realize we actually produced (428). But Graeber views this as a good thing, which he indicates by posing a few rhetorical questions as part of his rhetorical strategy: “Is non-fetishized consciousness possible? If so, would we even want it?” (430).

These, indeed, are vexing questions—in Graeber’s terms they constitute “a genuine dilemma” (430). Still, for me, they are beside the point. It seems not helpful to insist that the “imaginary totalit[ies]” and social relations we produce can “only come into real existence if everyone act[s] as if the fetish object actually [does] have subjective qualities” (430)—as he rightfully shows, the human tendency to fetishize objects is inevitable and inescapable. The true analytic challenge, seems to me, to determine what kinds of fetishes hold what kinds of value for what people, then to understand when and why they work that way. Graeber’s emphasis on tracing the idea of social contract, back in time and across continents, to reinscribe the unremarkable notion that human beings ultimately produce fetish objects to misrecognize their own productive powers and to reconfigure social networks tends to the curious conclusion that the only thing left for one to do is to be aware of this process—to somehow develop the kind of consciousness about this process his argument disallows, a perspective on this matter his claim discourages one from believing even exists. “They key factor would appear to be,” in his view, “not whether one sees things as a bit topsy-turvy from one’s immediate perspective…but rather, whether one has the capacity to at least occasionally step into some overarching perspective from which the machinery is visible...” (431).
Ironically, it is in the spirit of developing an "overarching perspective"—precisely to develop a critique of the "machinery" that renders fetishes "[i]nvisible"—that I find the concept of the fetish to be useful as a theoretical device.

_The fetish as (part of an) immanent critique_

As I have already discussed, the variety of ritual devices used to solidify social compacts between African and European traders during fifteenth century commercial activity spawned a discourse among Protestant merchants about what they perceived to be an African obsession with "fathis-oaths." This they considered evidence of an entire social system constructed upon the worship of "fetissos," or fetishes (Pietz 1987: 23) in our terms.

Seemingly associated with savage religious traditions, the word "fetish" in Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment philosophy quickly became code for primitive belief. Karl Marx was aware of this legacy when he challenged the anti-Semitic Catholic scholar Karl Heinrich Hermes, who advocated the censorship of religious criticism in the mid-nineteenth century. Believing "religious belief was the basis of civic morality" and civic morality was the foundation of citizenship, Hermes insisted, "Religion is the basis of the state and the most necessary condition for every association." As proof he suggested this was true even "in the crudest form of childish fetishism," where "it nevertheless...raises man above his sensuous desires" (Marx 1975: 189). Marx, however, was aware of the Enlightenment tradition\(^\text{18}\) that used fetishism as a foil against

\(^{18}\) Even though fetishism occupied this peculiar position in Enlightenment discourse, "the appearance of fetishism was less an expression of 'the Enlightenment mentality' than it was a symptom of the effect of the Seven Years War" (Pietz 1996: 250), "the first war waged between European states primarily for control of overseas possessions" (Ibid.: 249). In other words, the concept of the fetish—as a means to articulate capitalist and non-capitalist spheres of value, emerges in the moment where "the sweetness of sugar mixes with the blood of slaves" (Pietz 1996: 250, cf. Mintz 1985).
normative views of religion and seized this opportunity to develop a critique, suggesting, "Fetishism is so far from raising man above his sensuous desires that, on the contrary, fetishism is the religion of desire" (Ibid., also cited in Pietz 1993: 136).

Fetishism, as a new conceptual category, located spiritual power in physical—rather than metaphysical—entities, fostering the secularization of knowledge (that is the basis of all critique) by making a person's relationship "to material objects rather than to God the key question for historians of religion and mythology," in Pietz's (1993: 138) words. Marx would later use this idea to develop his own intervention. At the time this notion was quite controversial because, in allowing people to treat material entities as icons worthy of worship, the fetish marks people by their seeming inability to suppress interest in "sensuous object[s]" in favor of a universal conception of the Divine.

The irony, of course—and this is what Marx tried to show—is that at the same time that fetishism was used to define those subjects and societies incapable of rationality, European society was assuming the characteristics of a fetish, by this same definition.\(^{19}\) What is civil society, after all, but "the collective space of particular desires and their objective forms of gratification" (Pietz 1993: 141)—what one might call "the right of all to the gratification of desire while in reality continuing the negative integration of society" (Bernstein 1991: 4)? From the standpoint of a Marxist critique, this is simply "the cult of the government's will" (Pietz 1993: 141), which underscores the paradoxical quality of freedom in "liberal democratic states" (Bernstein 1991: 4, cf. Robinson 1997).

\(^{19}\) As this point implies, for Marx, capitalist society, itself, was a fetish (Pietz 1998: 248).
Marx was thus faced with the challenge of trying to create a universal class from within the fabric of human social life—an immanent critique, of sorts. To do this, he developed a “critical analogy between religious fetishism and civil society” (Pietz 1993: 141). Christianity (the religion of an abstract, omnipresent entity), is the form of worship that superceded fetishism (the religion of libidinal desires), just as the state (in Hegel’s conception) is the form of society that surpassed civil society (the realm of individual interest). The Marxist critique is theoretically designed to dismantle the universalist pretensions of institutions like the Church and the State by stressing the social significance of those material desires and inclinations that structure popular appreciation for fetish worship, on one hand, and civil society, on the other. In other words, “fetishism and political economy” come “closer” to fulfilling human aspirations than “monotheism and statism.” For that reason, “fetishism and political economy”—as domains of social practice—can be used to challenge the pretense of “monotheism and statism” to achieve “some sort of transcendental reality…” The critique is designed to establish “a humane atheist morality,” that parallels a “radical democratic socialism” (Pietz 1993: 142). At the very least, the concept of the fetish provides a critical method for grappling with the categories of a state discourse on neoliberalism that overlooks the increase in stratification and dearth of opportunity that have accompanied economic liberalization. This final point underscores my concern with understanding the athletic infrastructure unfolding as a testament to the preponderance of neoliberal strategies in contemporary Senegal.

Chapter two sets the tone for the rest of the dissertation by exploring the social consequences of economic stagnation and chronic joblessness: the image of what many
perceive to be “lazy” young men in the public sphere. This civic and moral discourse tends to be especially critical of young men who allegedly “drink tea all day” instead of finding something more productive to do with their time. But this attitude elides the long history of youth protest against the political and economic policies that have, in part, produced the fact of stagnation. What’s more, the national government systematically repositioned and displaced the most strident critics of Senegalese neoliberalism, bribing them with overseas scholarships and government positions. Thus, much of what people see as political and economic inactivity is manufactured through state-sponsored encadrement (Diouf 1996): techniques of trapping, quartering, and containing youth.

Encadrement means, more precisely, “enframement.” Thus the “problem of youth,” more than a reliable image of postcolonial strife, indexes the way a particular (male, unemployed, marginalized) population is either abstracted from civil society (as a menace that preys on it) or located within it as a group whose worst is menacing, but whose best is still rather unindustrious. Against this cynical stance, I provide insights that suggest youth develop an implicit critique of hegemonic attitudes in the way they “erupt” into public space. What’s more, in doing so, youth register a unique form of historicity through techniques of leisure that include pioneering and popularizing tea making as a new urban aesthetic. In this regard, youth begin where—in terms of moral discourses—they are: on the street. It is from this position that they “make their own history.”

Chapter three proceeds by chronicling and interrogating a moment when Senegalese peoples were forced to witness the stakes of neoliberalism from within the walls of a makeshift cell. In re-reading the ethnographic record of George W. Bush’s
2003 visit to Gorée Island, I try to understand the way football is implicated in new political and economic relationships that have shifted the trajectory of financial ties from a European to a North American—and in some ways more “global”—orientation. As part of this shift in political priority, “youth” emerges as a category characterized by its relative liminality—not merely (or even primarily) as a result of chronological age; but, more importantly, with regard to a Senegalese youth’s ability to secure a space in the nation’s avenues of social reproduction. In considering the stereotypes that restrict female options and frustrate male aspirations, I seek to comprehend an absence of youth in sectors of social life so profound they have elsewhere been labeled the “lost generation.” My research suggests, instead, that youth have developed creative ways to register new forms of historical consciousness.

As part of his visit to Gorée, Bush gave a meditation on the legacy of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade with an eye to present possibilities. Whose interests does this soliloquy serve? To the extent that this dissertation is especially concerned with the role of sport in postcolonial Senegal, I am inclined to consider the strategies and stakes associated with Senegal’s effort to reposition itself internationally. What kind of game is the state playing? Who are the different players in this contest? How is this competition judged? And, finally, who are the spectators? The latter question is especially appropriate given that the inhabitants of Gorée are tortured by the “memory” of the U.S. President’s arrival on the island. If not for their benefit, this political transaction, then for whom? How do the tragic consequences of this occasion prepare us to theorize the stakes of neoliberalism, and who is investing in it?
Chapter four is likewise concerned with the content of new domestic and international circuits of exchange, this time by considering the new valences associated with basketball, which is now more than ever, a force in Senegalese social life and career pursuit for economically marginalized and politically dispossessed youth. As part of my analysis, I consider the way(s) this phenomenon heightens the social relevance of gender as a principle of differentiation, especially with respect to employment possibilities. Thus besides being a “youth,” the ethnographic information recounted here suggests, as I have indicated above, that masculinity is an important prerequisite for the actor imagined to best empower this postcolonial nation. Meanwhile, the appropriate tactics of empowerment are grounded in new kinds of historicity: if, as chapter 3 suggests, football is bound up in strategies of national progress, basketball has become popular with individual persons and firms working to reposition themselves locally and globally.

Chapter four discusses the efforts of actors who seek to better position themselves by beginning with the minimal resources available to them: the bodies of young people and free time occasioned by the absence of labor. In the case of youth, this involves their own bodies, while coaches and trainers harness the productive energies of athletes under their dominion.

These athletic enterprises rely on discourses that quickly become naturalized. In this section, I discuss the agents, scouts, coaches, and trainers that operate within this domain and who obsess over the physical characteristics they believe will translate into success for the players they seek to recruit. They consider Senegal to be an especially fertile terrain for discovering new talent. These players are allegedly uncorrupted by the greed that characterizes sport in its most financially lucrative locales. And yet, by
combining ethnographic detail with photos that appeared in *ESPN Magazine*, I discern—in the contradictions of this fetishized image—parallels with that well-known modern discourse concerning the “noble savage,” who this time is imagined as a fitting antidote, not to the rapid advance of modern capitalism but to the high stakes competition that defines neoliberal market mechanisms. Basketball experts abstract from the personal histories of Senegalese players to circulate stereotypes with profound implications for the possibilities these athletes may pursue.

I follow this segment of the manuscript with chapter five, which develops a conceptual framework appropriate for understanding the seeming paradox between the fact that coaches and directors, players and trainers associated with Senegalese basketball consider it to be empowering not despite the profit motive—which is the discourse in the United States—but because of it. The notion is that, if an academy can be constructed that captures the interest of professional teams from the U.S. (especially, but elsewhere as well), it can position Senegalese ballplayers enjoy the trappings of success. Far from denying that he hopes to make players into commodities, Head Coach Bengali Kaba once referred to his camp as an “industry,” but is—at the same time—unquestionably concerned with strengthening his players’ moral resolve.

I close by discussing some features of the 2006 NBA Finals which, in some sense, represent the culmination of the project to send Senegalese athletes overseas; and yet, for several reasons I discuss, it is altogether unclear how this plan will unfold. Taken together, the various examples I discuss illustrate the strategies through which subjects use sport to pursue socio-economic *mobility* (in society and across national borders) through techniques that reproduce essentialized caricatures about them, even as they
move between different spheres of value by seizing upon the media outlets, financial
circuits, and institutional apparatuses they encounter while at play in the postcolony.
A Time to Remember

Tout le temps

It was 2002 when I first arrived in Dakar, Senegal to investigate what strategies people had developed for coping with the nation's ongoing labor crisis. But the first time I described my research to a friend, I was greeted with a curious response. "You're interested in unemployment [Chômage]? Oh, like the young men who sit and drink tea all day long?"

I was confused, but tried my best to wade through the subjective discomfort I experienced. Perhaps this was an occupational hazard of the ethnographic enterprise. I tried to ignore my confusion, conceding that code switching usually makes for missed communications: to converse with peers and colleagues, I made use of a linguistic repertoire that included French, Wolof, English, and Fulani. Apparently, not without some bizarre consequences.

But, the more I spoke with people about Senegal's economic stagnation, the more frequently I noticed tea (in Wolof, attaya) was conjoined with unemployment. And people typically associated high rates of unemployment with young men not simply unable but unwilling to secure work.

In the words of a Centre de Bopp camp counselor, "They are always drinking tea." [Il prend le thé à tout moment]. He told me that young men in Senegal used tea to "kill time" [tuer le temps]. Lacking not simply employment but opportunities to develop
skills employers were seeking, people insisted, young men spent their days in the streets with their friends, exhausting their time in tea-making rituals.

This public discourse bore little resemblance to statistical data. Concerning Senegal’s unemployed population—of which urban youth make up more than 40% of the 48% tally—college graduates are prominent, and many of these are young women (Diouf 1996). I thus became fascinated with the widespread idea that unemployment is a problem that affects young men exclusively. Even more to the point, I was curious to know the extent to which perceptions of and participation in the process of tea-making entailed a historical consciousness, or historicity (Trouillot 1997), bound up in the labor drought that dominated social life in postcolonial Senegal. I began to sense that the task of tea-making was something of a kind of social hieroglyph (Marx 1992[1867]: 79)—a nexus for relationships that remain hidden if scholars fail to apprehend the nuanced differences built into the ritualized reproductions of what has, in Senegal, become not simply a form of leisure experienced collectively but an urban aesthetic.

The tea chronicles

Attaya is an important aspect of Senegalese social life. People often make and consume it in the evenings after dinner. Or while sitting around, leisurely, a family member or neighbor might make tea for all to enjoy. The custom is to serve guests first, then senior-most members of the family, and so on down the hierarchy. In a nation that prides itself on teranga—Wolof for “hospitality”—tea is often the vehicle through which community relations are (re)organized and (re)produced.

Yet, despite its ubiquity in Senegalese domestic spaces, attaya is not considered indigenous to Senegal. During more than three years of ethnographic research in the
country, young people—especially those who were unemployed—produced narratives about the tea’s origins elsewhere. Each version of the story was basically the same.

Attaya, they insisted, originated in north Africa. Once enjoyed exclusively by Islamic royalty, the practice spread into Senegal, where it has now become a popular custom. Interviewees nevertheless stressed that attaya was not common across all classes of society until Senegal’s crise économique [economic crisis] of the post-colonial period, which became especially pronounced after failed structural adjustment programs of the 1970s and ‘80s. Concerning this period of financial malaise, those interviewed seemed altogether disappointed by the government’s response.

Local rituals, it seems, provide a host of techniques for making sense of history in new African democracies that have left the issue of social and economic inclusion “largely unaddressed” (White 2005). For that reason, it may be worthwhile to say something about the specific dynamics of the Senegalese tea-making tradition before elaborating further the way it is implicated in efforts to remake the present.

Making tea in record time

Ingredients:
1 box of tea (measurements 2 (length) x 1.5 (width) x 4 (height)
sugar (1/4 kilogram)
handful of mint leaves w/ stems
water

Directions:
1) Boil water then add tea. Or, keep tea leaves in the bottom of the pot while water boils. Keep teapot covered.
2) From small (“shot”) glasses, add one cup of water for every two people present. Or, eyeball the amount of water to be added.
3) Add two shot glasses worth of sugar. Or sweeten to taste.

20 This narrative reminds one of Thorsten Veblen’s (1994 [1899]) discussion about the way objects mark class divisions that, at times, map onto social distinctions (Bourdieu 1984), though unevenly in some instances (Colleredo-Mansfeld 1999: 199).
4) Cook tea in tea pot until ready (no specified amount of time).
5) When tea is almost ready, pour it from the pot into an empty shot glass. Pour tea
   back and forth between different glasses to create “foam” (in local vernacular,
   mosse).
6) Pour the tea back into the pot, careful to preserve the mosse in the glasses.
7) Finish boiling the tea.
8) Rinse mint leaves. Once tea bubbles over, add half a bundle of mint leaves—or a
   third of a bundle, depending on the taste you aim to achieve. Cover for 1 minute
9) Pour a sip of tea into a mug or separate cup to taste.
10) Serve beginning with guests, then elders on down to teens and pre-teens. (Young
    children are generally prohibited from drinking tea).

As the directions make clear, there is no single way to make attaya. The production of
this tea entails a precise calibration of creativity and context—but more on this later.

In the way it is enjoyed, attaya functions as an after-dinner treat or conversational
refreshment on weekends and lazy afternoons, except for young men, who often drink it
throughout the day while huddled together on wooden benches in marketplaces or in
vacant neighborhood spaces. Some young women drink tea, but not many. Fewer still
make it. As I have already pointed out, whenever one broaches the subject of
unemployment in Senegal, the conversation immediately turns to young men and the fact
that, as many people complained, Il prends le thé à tout moment!

It’s hard to say how many rounds of tea are served in occasions such as these
because young men will quite often exhaust nearly all of their daylight hours drinking
tea. The entire process for making the tea might take as much as much as an hour, and
there are usually at least three rounds of tea in one serving. But there can be as many as
five rounds in one serving and no limit to the number of servings that follow in sequence.

To the extent that one demographic, more than any other, produces Senegal’s tea
officianados, gendered and generational attitudes structure popular discourses about this
beverage. Because while most adults (for instance, people 35 and older, with children of
their own and secure employment), complain frequently and flippantly about idle young men with nothing better to do than make tea, Senegalese youth situate this trend more specifically in the immediate context of economic crisis.

As we sat in the parlor of his older brother’s home in Dakar, my friend Baba once explained to me that while attaya had emerged in the past few decades as a popular social custom throughout Senegal, it had only become closely associated with young men during the past decade. What’s more, the mode of consumption had changed even more recently. As Ibrahim, a middle-aged Senegalese accountant once remarked, Avant le devaluée, c'était trois fois. Maintenant, c'est deux fois [Before the devaluation, it was three times. Now, only two]. And this was not simply his opinion. As Cheikh, Baba’s older brother, once said, “C’est devaluée…deux fois seulement” [“It’s devalued…only twice now”]. (This from the forty-something year-old Information Technology specialist whose job—and that of his partner, a Management Consultant—supported three siblings, three children, and a three-person household staff.) Cheikh’s friends and colleagues, close to his age, likewise traced a shift in tea consumption to this historical transition.

“Le devaluée” refers to the moment when the Senegalese government devalued its currency—the franc CFA\(^\text{21}\)—in 1994 as part of its structural adjustment program. Rather than aid the local predicament, this development intensified economic anxieties. As Senegalese merchants had been moving overseas throughout the postcolonial period in search of new trade circuits, the value of foreign currencies increased against Senegalese

paper. The above comments by Cheikh and Ibrahim, which mirrored other interview responses, indicate that although tea was previously served in three rounds, after the currency was devalued, people decided to serve only two. One could perhaps infer the declining value of Senegalese currency encouraged people to be more frugal. But then, tea costs only 100 FCFA: affordable even for the Senegal’s lowest income-earners, especially since people usually pool resources to purchase ingredients for tea. For these reasons, it is unlikely this idea arose exclusively as a way of staving off inflation. Whatever the motivation, it is useful to ponder the reasons people might record economic trauma in their techniques of tea production and (re)distribution.

There was a particular nuance to this historicity that is most easily grasped as a class dimension. One day, while reviewing the transcript of ethnographic interviews, I noticed the idea that one ought to serve fewer rounds of attaya because the currency had been devalued was a joke people (especially men) in middle and upper-middle class Senegalese homes told frequently. In the streets, instead, young men had developed tournaments of resilience in which they impressed each other with the amount of tea they could manufacture and consume. There, one gained status among one’s peers for being able to drink the largest quantities of the very blackest tea. This was tea that was the most concentrated, which means it also had the most caffeine. As a result it was, further, very harsh on the stomach. For this reason men, like my good friend Taphar (who has a weak stomach and cannot drink a lot of tea) are considered frail. (But then, Taphar is a law student at the nation’s premier university. So, from the standpoint of street youth this was further evidence to confirm their perception that he is weak.)
The idea that tea is ideally consumed by men of fortitude takes its cue from the producers of the product who, in acknowledging the powerful chemical composition of these Chinese green tea leaves imprint the title “Gunpowder” on the package, extending the idea that this tea is a weapon that should only to be wielded by the most able-bodied youth. These are truly novel circumstances in which the potency of youth is gauged by a different criteria than that of old. Social predecessors of the “lazy” young men who now drink tea all day achieved notoriety for staging a series of demonstrations that took place so frequently at the height of Senegal’s economic crisis that the main University in Dakar (l’Université de Cheikh Anta Diop) suffered an année blanche—a suspended year—between 1988 and 1989. The Senegalese government headed by Abdou Diouf, in response, award several prominent student leaders with overseas scholarships, and granted Aliou Sow, one of the most outspoken social critics, a position in the Senegalese government, where he now serves as the Minister of Youth. Through these techniques of incorporation, the state sidestepped a quest for revolutionary change and transformation. In these informal urban tea lodges, it seems, the desire to hold one’s ground in the midst of economic turmoil was invaginated: folded inward as those most able to shake up the system now instead pour fiery liquid from cup to cup.

“[C]learing our neighborhoods...of...existential dramas of all kinds.”

From the beginning of the 1980s, newspaper articles and electoral speeches stressed the need to crack down on increasing levels of lawlessness (Diouf 1996). But, what appeared simply as social disorder was rather more specifically a sense of social discontent among young people grappling with chronic unemployment.

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Government officials recognize two distinct classes of youth. The first group is made up of *encombrements humains* [social obstructions], those considered especially peripheral to Senegalese society whose lives are allegedly characterized by an affinity for loitering, sexual deviance, panhandling, and criminal violence (Collignon 1984). Many of these youth migrated to Dakar some years previously in search of work but, in a context of scarce opportunities, frequently found themselves in prison as a result of the (often illicit) strategies they used to secure a living (*Le Soleil* 1990: 18, cf. Diouf 1996: 231). The other group of youth refers to the student population. One might imagine this group to be statistically insignificant regarding youth who are chronically without work. But in the context of this postcolonial economic crisis, education is no guarantee of employment. A marker of class status, education has nevertheless become redundant in the quest for public sector employment, as those who have never worked are now more educated than those who do; this is also youngest demographic, making up more than 80.8% of the jobless number (Bocquier 1991: 55).

Despite the state’s effort to distinguish between lawless youth and innocent victims of economic trauma, both groups waged political violence, in material and ideological forms, throughout the 1980s and 1990s (Bathily, Diouf, and Mbojd 1995). Soon after Senghor abdicated the Presidency (in 1981) to make way for the ascendance of his former Prime Minister, Diouf, youth discovered avenues to express their discontent in visual form. Youth had, since the independence in 1960, launched a series of reoccurring demonstrations against state apathy and incompetence, most notably those that coincided with the events of May 1968 in France (Bathily 1992). But public confidence in the
Presidency diminished dramatically with suspicion of vote-tampering during what would otherwise have been Abdou Diouf’s first democratic elections of 1983 (Fatton 1987).

By the next election period in 1987, student leaders were so well organized that they forced politicians into a series of discussions about how they might take concrete steps to ameliorate employment conditions. Few of these interventions paid off, though it is notable that young people, by then, were considered so powerful they merited an audience with political officials. Youth activists, in this moment, had been given a new mandate by Abdoulaye Wade’s Sopi movement, which used the Wolof word for change as part of an organizational strategy for transforming Senegal. This idea coincided with the Set/Setal program concerned, specifically, with remaking the political and moral space of Senegalese society (Enda Tiers Monde 1991, Niane, Savané, and Diop 1991). Besides assaulting symbols of wealth in some of Dakar’s most affluent neighborhoods, many youth opposed alcohol sales in various parts of the capital city and even attacked the drug addicts, alcoholics, and other homeless populations imagined to be fueling social degradation.

In this way, youth simultaneously personified disorder and social progress in the “violence, destruction, and resistance” to Senegalese civil society that characterized their efforts. Youth were “going to tear everything down in order to rebuild” in the words of one high school student (Niane, Savané, and Diop 1991, as quoted in Diouf 1996: 240). The social consequences of this youth intervention are difficult to gauge, but there were definite changes in urban infrastructure as “young people put into practice their credo: order and cleanliness.” During this time Dakar—as the African city “most infested with squatters and traffic jams”—was cleaned from top to bottom, “Public parks that
[previously] were no more than sordid urinals were restored to their original role, rehabilitated and beautified” (Ibid.). In the midst of the heavy rains that fell in September 1990, youth embarked on a campaign to clean up the capital city, focusing prominently on trash heaps and contaminated water. One youth offered this moral justification, “The massive rain is a sign of purification, so we must clear our neighborhoods, rid them of their recent memory, and of existential dramas of all kinds” (Diallo 1993: 211, as quoted in Diouf 1996: 243).

There is little doubt that youth aimed to provide public works services they believed Senegal needed because of the state’s criminal negligence, or that they were explicitly concerned with attacking the national tradition of authoritarian democracy. “Young rioters” made “the symbols of the state” their “principal targets” (Diouf 1996: 240):

“the center of the civil administration of greater Dakar was torched; eighty of the public transit company’s buses and numerous telephone booths were damaged; government and administration cars were attacked and set on fire…”

In this way, youth sought to combat the 40-year stranglehold of Senghor’s Parti Socialiste. The state’s response revealed its sense of the possibilities for radical change that inhered in this moment and its totalitarian approach to democracy. “[T]he irruption of youth into the political arena in such violent modalities…culminated with the declaration of a state of emergency and the deployment of police throughout Dakar,” although political officials were careful to protect the property of the wealthy even as they sought to contain and diffuse youth protest, “the goal being to isolate the Plateau [Dakar’s wealthiest district]…The poorer neighborhoods, especially the Médina, the
HLM (Habitations à Loyer Modéré)-subsidized housing development district, and Colobane, were left to the young rebels and to the opposition” (Diouf 1996: 241).

This logic of redirection and containment was not simply a political improvisation. It reveals, rather, an organization principle through which the postcolonial state has managed its primary social menace: youth.

**Fighting their way out of the frame**

“... the young have produced a precocious reading of the nationalist movement’s evolution. Identifying the authoritarian drift of the postcolonial powers whose neocolonial economic and political orientations they denounce. This awareness seems to have been the basis for youth’s resistance to repression, *encadrement*, and cooptation through which the state handles social movements.”

Mamadou Diouf (1996: 226)

Senegalese statecraft—in the way that it has used sports as a way to combat moral degradation and youth activism among young people and through initiatives that have provided political positions or overseas scholarships to the nation’s most radical students leaders—has managed the strategic manipulation of youth through a principle Mamadou Diouf calls *encadrement*. This, incidentally, is also a term used to describe summer sports camps, like those hosted at the Centre de Bopp. *Encadrement* is difficult to translate from French to English. In its most extreme form, this is a logic of quartering—in two senses. First, it denotes a way of containing youth in particular districts or quarters of specific towns and cities. Then, also, because this term connotes the vicious dissection of an object, it suggests the quartering of an animal spliced into parts for sale in a marketplace.

At other times, given the well-orchestrated Machiavellian dimension of *encadrement*, I’ve been inclined to translate it as “containment.” This term, however,
seems insufficient to convey the elaborate techniques of social reorganization at play in
the Senegalese postcolony, which is why I, ultimately, decided to translate *encadrement*
as “enframement” to capture the material *and* geographical dimensions of Senegalese
statecraft.

Instead of acknowledging that “youth” refers to a demographic geographically
isolated (in urban areas), gendered (as young men, more socially mobile than their female
peers), and classed (as economically marginal)—a demographic produced in conjunction
with the economic trials of postcoloniality—the state identifies lawless and idle youth as
the source of social problems. 22 In this way, “youth” are permanently disarticulated from
civil society. Except occasionally for students, youth are not recognized as a group to
which the government must be accountable. They are, instead, imagined as the origin of
social unrest. Yet the provocative tactics of redress youth use to counter this “nationalist
reading” (Diouf 1996: 226), instead of reversing this outlook, seems to have ruined
public perception of this demographic, for the most part:

“La violente irruption de la jeunesse africaine dans les sphères publiques
et domestiques semble avoir eu pour conséquence la construction de leur
comportement comme menace, et semble avoir provoqué dans l’ensemble
de la société une panique à la fois morale et civique” (Diouf 2003: 1).

[The violent irruption of African youth into the public and domestic spheres
seems to have resulted in the construction of their behavior as a threat, and to
have provoked, within society as a whole, a panic that is simultaneously moral
and civic.]”

And, by positioning youth as the source of social “panic,” the state makes the need for
government intervention all the more urgent.

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22 Here, as elsewhere, “Punishment has replaced rehabilitation,” eliding any effort to identify “the
root causes of crime” (Moleotch and McClain 2003: 685).
In coming to terms with the Senegalese government’s strategies of enframing, I find it useful to note Maurice Wallace’s (2003) critical insight that photographs—and in this case, our picture of society—is “always subject to reproducing blind spots that tell more about the scopic criminality of the one who enframes than the enframed one” (Wallace 2003: 29). As I’ve suggested, this framing technique or *encadrement* is a mode of material and ideological organization (cf. Derrida 1993: 29, 1987: 74). Simultaneously, this “reclassification of young people is manifested in institutionalized hostility toward them” (Diouf 2003: 5) — a disdain heightened by the idea that youth have abdicated their primary responsibility. In the context of chronic economic stagnation and political ossification, youth are imagined to possess resources of social regeneration. This attitude was evident, for instance, in Abdoulaye Wade’s strategic deployment of youth activists and artists as part of the 2000 *Sopi* campaign that ultimately earned him the Presidency. His strategy involved using rap music artists, condemned by previous governments for promoting licentious values, to spread his message, as he insisted on the priority of youth concerns. Rap music (as Wade seemed to understand) had emerged in the decade prior as part of youth discontent. When persistent student demonstrations between 1987 and ‘88 caused universities to be closed for an entire academic year (Benga 2002), many young people formed rap groups as a way of developing a social critique. By the end of 1988, there were more than 3,000 rap groups in Dakar; this city, in fact, is third only to Tokyo and Paris in the international hierarchy of rap music production. Key to this story is the way Wade made use of the most valuable resource youth possess: their free time (Ralph 2006b).23

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23 As Mamadou Diouf (2003: 7) has written, with regard to Senegalese youth, “Their
Time is the only economic resource some youth consider themselves to possess, besides their bodies. Thus much of what constitutes social activity for unemployed youth involves using these factors of production in concert. Many young people invest their time in the pursuit of athletic careers, musical production, or political protest. Elsewhere, youth strategically use their disconnectedness from the nation’s primary social institutions to travel abroad (Buggenhagen 2003) by, for instance, using trade routes created by the Murid tariqaa to create commercial opportunities in New York, Tokyo, Rome, Madrid, Paris, Dubai, and other global cities (Carter 1997):

Excluded from the arenas of power, work, education, and leisure, young Africans construct places of socialization and new sociabilities whose function is to show their difference, either on the margins of society or at its heart, simultaneously as victims and active agents, and circulating in a geography that escapes the limits of the national territory (Diouf 2003: 5)." But if access to international networks enables some youth to “escape” this postcolonial predicament, it leaves others (imagined as having the requisite masculine characteristics to do so), disparaged for not capitalizing on the opportunities seemingly available in the present. The idle young man who, instead of fleeing the civil sector, seems shackled to it, thus becomes the index of a pathologically unproductive subject. In this sense, youth are subject to the state’s “frame up,” or criminalizing gaze (Wallace 2003).

Making attaya, then, constitutes a displacement of sorts for youth who are frustrated by the persistent absence of economic progress, unable to pursue an educational or employment agenda overseas, and disenchanted by the diminished local prospects of a youth social movement, even as it has also become a method for valorizing

demonstrations, even those whose principal idiom of violence, always has an element of playing hooky.” “Hooky,” in my view, because youth self-consciously abstain from participation in formal social institutions.
and reinscribing masculine notions of strength at this particular moment in Senegalese postcolonial history. In that sense, it indexes an emergent form of historicity as characteristic of the way this period is remembered (cf. Cole 2001, Connerton 1989). At the same time, the practice of preparing and serving tea, especially as it relates to the unofficial lodges of unemployed young men engaged in the practice, has become an important coping mechanism—a technique for building solidarity in the midst of economic crisis—a way of remembering, in other words.  

**Killing time**

When I asked young men why tea was so important in Senegal, they answered readily, “Ça tue le temps.” Even sometimes in English, “It ‘kills time,’ as we say here.”

But the way this activity is described as “killing time” does not fit its English usage. Killing time in the U.S., for instance, has to do with wasting away the little bit of time one has until one must do something socially significant: someone who arrives ten minutes early for an appointment, for instance, has some “time to kill.” This is also true if it is 9 p.m. and one hopes to be fashionably late for a house party. The person may, then, have some time to kill before s/he needs to leave.

In Senegal, by contrast, young men explained they needed to “kill time” because there was far too much of it. “Here we have an abundance of time,” Ibrahim Coulibaly

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24 Here, the work of Maurice Halbwachs (1925, 1941, 1980) is instructive, though I prefer to theorize “collective memory” as a form of “historicity” following Trouillot (1997). Historicity, as I’ve discussed elsewhere (Ralph 2006a: 80 n.6), has two dimensions: it refers first to historical movement, or the conditions in which subjects are formed (and environments transformed) through social processes. This construct simultaneously promotes consideration of the narratives subjects produce about these developments, which register their historical consciousness.
once told me. “Our time has no value,” in the words of Mar’ta Diagne. While it certainly makes sense that someone who is unemployed might have an abundance of free time, “killing time,” does not seem a reliable strategy for escaping such a scenario. Couldn’t that time be put to use acquiring skills that increase one’s prospects for employment?

I suspect most Senegalese subjects, especially the many unemployed youth, would answer in the negative because this sense that one needs to “kill time” actually springs from the belief that there are few, if any, opportunities available to improve one’s chances of securing a job. Instead, most youth feel consigned to cope with employment’s conspicuous absence.

This intensified embrace of leisure seemingly contradicts a key feature of economic theory. It is often believed that leisure becomes increasingly important as one’s salary increases. Following this idea, someone who is paid by the hour wants as many hours as possible in order to generate as large an income as possible—up to a point. Once a certain level of income has been reached, economists tend to believe, people are more willing to take vacations. They trade leisure for labor, in other words, which is why this principle is called the “substitution effect” (cf. Kimball and Shapiro 2003). What does it mean, then, that Senegalese youth seem to have embraced leisure despite the near absence of labor?

There is, of course, another way of reading this scenario through a strategy more in sync with anthropological thinking about the matter of production. Perhaps the model discussed here is too “economistic”—based on the unjustified assumption that human

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25 This sense of “personal time” (Durkheim 1915[1912]: 441) is, as Nancy Munn suggests—and as I will show—“infused with collective time representations and activity rhythms” (Munn 1992: 95).
beings are, in all contexts, profit-maximing (Graeber 2001, Sahlins 1976, Malinowski 1922). Instead, it might serve the analyst to discern the social relationships actors create through productive activity, even when it is unwaged (Sangren 2000, Munn 1986). Thus, if we define value not in strictly economic terms but as the content of productive activity (Turner 1984), we might arrive at a framework better suited to explain the shift in social relations that such action mediates (Graeber 2001).

In the Senegalese case, in particular, the task of translating time through tea production is certainly a way of sorting out subjects.26

Coping with crisis, sorting out subjects

The values stressed in moral discourses often resonate with the production of social recognition and prestige (Graeber 2001: 7-9). Senegalese *attaya* forms a fascinating case in point. My friend Baba’s older brother Mar’ta was convinced, for instance, that making and serving tea was one of the best ways to build character:

“If you want to be generous, start with the way you distribute tea—are you fair and just, or just selfish? Are you greedy? Do you play favorites?”

These were lessons he had learned from his father as a child. Now in his late thirties, Mar’ta was still convinced that informal tea ceremonies provided the occasion to discern moral values. While watching his younger siblings make and share tea, he quietly observed attributes he hoped they would develop further, although his father had taken a far more instrumentalist approach: assigning different responsibilities associated with tea-making to different children on different occasions to see who performed well at which tasks.

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26 In this regard, Senegalese *attaya* forms an instructive counterpoint to Piya Chatterjee’s (2001) work on feminized circuits of tea cultivation and circulation involving South Asian women.
With stories that varied in narrative detail, other interviewees confirmed the idea that producing *attaya* indexed personality traits—for better or worse. And yet, to the extent that tea-making is a cherished activity among unemployed young men, it now offers insights about the way subjects are sorted with respect to a very different set of criteria.

Frequently, when young men gather to share tea, they discuss young women. In fact as many people, I am sure, have noticed—but few have found it worthwhile to study (besides Nyamnjoh 2005, Buggenhagen 2003)—there is a local custom of caricaturing Senegalese women according to certain exaggerated physical characteristics and consumption patterns.

The most prominent of these hypostatizations, among young men, is the *disquette*. This term conjures the image of a woman who covets material goods: exquisite but revealing clothing, fancy European shoes and handbags, and expensive jewelry. The disquette is usually, though not necessarily, a woman in her late teens or twenties who manipulates men to support her expensive lifestyle, rewarding them with the promise to satisfy their sexual desires. In this way, the disquette’s main weapon is the strategic deferment of such gratification to assure a high standard of living.

The term “disquette”—which comes from the notion of the diskette one slides into and out of a computer as needed—does not always convey licentiousness. I sometimes noticed a young man might ask a woman if she is a disquette as a way of inquiring about whether she thinks she actually meets the standard of fancy dress her appearance seemed to connote. In and around the tea circle, however, conversations abound about the clever disquettes that bleed men of their money, consort with their a
husband’s closest friend, or defer sexual pleasure indefinitely while securing regular access to their partners’ finances.

A modification of this narrative features the *neufquette*. This pun relies on the auditory homology between the “dis-” part of the term “disquette” and the French word “dix” for ten. In this sense, instead of being a perfect ten (a women of physical perfection), the *neufquette* has only almost attained this idealized standard since *neuf* in French means “nine.”

The business of ranking and ordering women in these particular conversations, seems to be a way of positioning male subjects as the arbiters of proper physical and social comportment at the same time that their economic power—as the primary source of domestic income—has witnessed a precipitous decline. Even as they lament the economic stagnation that has made it impossible to secure a partner in a context that is dogmatically heteronormative (when asked if they are married, most Senegalese young men I interviewed will reply, “Who me? I don’t have anything!”), many unemployed youth infer they are unmarried because the women with whom they interact are of objectionable moral character.

There is one other way *attaya* provides a mechanism for coping with what is taken to be a masculinist crisis within and beyond this demographic: as a forum for cultivating artistic sensibilities born of the present— as a way, paradoxically, to produce a new form of art in public and popular contexts.

“The spaces deserted by political power”

“The ideological and cultural reorganization that flows from this posture of defiance takes place in the *spaces deserted by political power*...The function of these spaces, which escape the logics of public and administrative control, communitarian prescriptions, and state surveillance, is to serve as supports for acts that express within
the public sphere, in a violent, artistic, or spiritual way, a desire for recognition and presence.”

Mamadou Diouf (2003: 5)

“A man can be an artist at anything.”

Paul Rayburn (2004)

Seeing someone make attaya, one is struck by the careful effort taken to produce mosse through a process (renversé) that requires pouring the tea back and forth, repeatedly, from shot glass to shot glass. This occurs at a critical moment in the process of making tea that reveals one’s true expertise. In Baba’s words:

“Renversé is to try to make it beautiful. It’s like champagne. If it doesn’t have the mosse, it won’t look beautiful. People won’t drink it. Anybody can just boil some tea and serve it.”

And renversé as a way of producing foam is only possible because of what is locally imagined to be a uniquely Senegalese way of making attaya: “In Asia [where the tea is made] and North Africa [where they drink the same tea as well], tea is made by infusion. Here, we cook our tea,” Mohktar once explained.

And each time the tea is “cooked” and served, the foam must be (re)created anew, “We don’t use the same mosse for the second round. It must be made again.” Making the foam again for each fresh new pot of tea affirms one’s status as an expert attayeur (my term) since it proves the production of beautiful foam was no fluke.

But all this begs the question: if the goal is to make attaya look “like champagne,” what exactly are unemployed youth toasting?

A clue to the answer surfaces in attaya’s overweening sociality. In Boubacar’s words, “You can drink tea by yourself, but why would you? You do this for everyone else”—not simply to prove generosity or moral worth, as Mar’ta was discussing, but to demonstrate artistry. The best tea maker I knew in Thiès was Moussa, who was
employed as a salesperson at an informal (and illegal) cell phone boutique in Dakar. But he was quite proficient in the task because most of his days at the boutique were spent right across the street making and drinking tea with friends employed at neighboring stalls, since business was always slow.

Moussa was understood by family and friends to be a much better attayeur, for instance, than his brother Cheikh, who was actively involved in Senegalese politics (though in a position without pay). Cheikh assisted friends with their political campaigns and appeared as part of certain Senegalese Democratic Party (PDS) youth delegations (in his parent’s home, for instance, hung a picture from one particular meeting with the President).

Moussa was such an expert tea-maker that I only once heard him concede that someone else was more proficient in the craft. This occurred one day when a good friend, and former English major at the Université de Cheikh Anta Diop, visited as he was stopping through Thiès on his way overseas. Pape had been out of school for several years: he could no longer afford to pay for books and other related school fees. Finally, he had received an opportunity for employment from a cousin who worked in Italy as part of a trade circuit sustained through local ties to the Murid brotherhood. As Pape had been out of school for several years without any prospect for education or employment, he had spent time practicing his brush strokes in oil paints but had secured materials infrequently and worked only when he became aware of opportunities to sell his work at boutiques and at the beachside huts foreign tourists frequented.

After Pape made tea for us, one evening, Moussa suddenly queried, “Whose tea is better, mine or Pape’s?” I hesitated, not knowing whether I should defer to the guest or
to my good friend. Beyond that, I wasn’t quite sure whose tea tasted better. Pape’s tea was certainly a little bit different, but not necessarily better. That’s when Pape interjected, matter-of-factly, “It’s mine.”

And, to my surprise, without even waiting for my response, Moussa agreed. “Yeah, he’s the only person who makes better tea than I do.”

Months would pass before I realized there was more to this commentary than some idea of genius or natural talent. When Mouhamed, Moussa’s cousin, dropped out of school, deciding he wanted to rejoin his parents in Benin rather than stay in Dakar, he had to wait two months before his family sent someone to pick him up. For the first few weeks, his tasks around the home remained the same. But after he had been home for nearly a month, Moussa suddenly began asking Mouhamed to make tea every time it needed to be made. “Besides me, he makes the best tea in the house,” was his explanation.

I began to discover that expertise at making tea was equated with the amount of time someone had been idle: linked to the number of hours, it was imagined, masculine subjects had to invest in making attaya. It was not simply the case that the more time one invested in the craft, the better one became at it. Rather, the amount of time it was believed one possessed was the crucial factor for determining one’s expertise at making tea.

Thus, despite the masculinist overtones of Rayburn’s quote above, the point he conveys is remarkably astute. It seems that in Senegal, an unemployed, young “man can be an artist at anything”—even making tea. And this art has several dimensions by which observers—other participants in the tea-making process—assess it. How high does the
tea-maker hold the cup when pouring? How large is the foam? How good does it taste? How sweet is it? How dark?

Taste, in this case, is an especially slippery signifier, since people—obviously—do not agree on what the tea ought to taste like. Most unemployed young men prefer the tea as black as possible: cooked with large quantities of tea leaves, as long as possible, without burning. Many parents and older people, by contrast, prefer their tea léger. That is, light—cooked with less leaves and more water. Diluting the product, here, is an index of elite status. Women, too, who drink tea—especially those who are relatively affluent—prefer their tea this way. People who prefer attaya léger and therefore drink less tea also usually prefer to drink fewer rounds.

The craft of making tea thus requires one to assess one’s audience. How does one calibrate the class status of the audience members? How old are they? What is the gender breakdown? The successful attayeur positions himself atop local hierarchies by considering these many variables.

But the hierarchy of tea making poses a theoretical quandary. How could attaya refer, simultaneously, to a popular and an elite art form: popular in the sense that tea is always being made, all over Senegal, before audiences composed of friends, colleagues, comrades, and neighbors; yet elite because certain dimensions of the product are assessed by critics to determine the artist’s skill level, to gauge the attayeur’s attention to detail and respect for the craft?

The elite dimension of attaya reminds one of the way modern fine art is discussed and critiqued. Take a painting, for instance: crucial to the definition of such an aesthetic object is the painter’s painstaking attention to detail, which the critic assesses by studying
brush strokes, by scrutinizing color composition, pointing to lightness and darkness and noting the (in)consistency of hue(s). At first this seems a curious parallel, since the painter associated with the tradition of fine artist—as s/he is usually imagined—is someone whose elite status provides the opportunity for such an investment of energy and time in the product of his devotion. Senegalese youth, as the postcolonial lumpenproletariat, lie at the other economic extreme from such a bourgeois elite. On what grounds, then, this comparison?

One variable more than any other, it seems, accounts for the resonance between these two demographics. The term “youth” in postcolonial Senegal refers, as I have mentioned before, to a subject defined by his geographical isolation (often urban), gender (usually male), and class status (unemployed, economically marginal). Yet, most important for this definition is the person’s relationship to time: the subject must possess an overabundance of it, as a result of being all but disarticulated from civil society.

Time, then, helps to produce a unique regime of expertise, in the case of attaya. And these artists have an overabundance of it, not because they are so privileged economically they are freed from the tiresome toil of regular employment, but because work is so scarce these artists have little else to do with their time than polish their craft.27

I do not mean to suggest attaya can be equated with any object of fine art. Indeed, it differs from paintings or sculptures produced, for instance, by European elites for obvious reasons. At the same time, there is a powerful analogy between the careful and sustained attention to fulfilling aesthetic criteria that characterizes the work of the

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27 Thus even under conditions where the “spatial form” [in this case, the geography of dispossessed youth in urban Dakar] “controls temporality [and where] an imagined geography controls the possibility of social change and history[,] not all forms of temporality are [necessarily] erased.” In such a context, “the time of ‘eternal return,’ of recurrent ritual, is [often] preserved” (Harvey 2000: 160)—especially in local contexts where youth perfect the art of attaya.
fine artist and the careful calibration of generic qualities by which the attayeur proceeds. That this occurs in the context of producing an object designed for popular consumption makes the scenario all the more curious, but makes this claim no less tenable. Rather it suggests there is a fractured class dynamic at the heart of this particular object which enables one to rank producers of this art-object even though the barriers to consumption of it, when compared to that of other like goods, are remarkably low. For that reason, it seems, there is a paradox of time at the heart of Senegalese postcolony, which explains why there is so much social ambivalence concerning the category of youth, a demographic erected at the fault lines of such a contradiction.

**Living in “Lost” Time, Working in “Free” Time**

“Free time is shackled to its opposite. Indeed the oppositional relation in which it stands imbues free time with certain essential characteristics.”

Theodor Adorno (1991: 187)

For Adorno, there is something about the way “free time” is produced under capitalist conditions that denies it the sort of esteem it is uncritically assigned. For even when people believe they are, for instance, working out in the gym to de-stress after a hard day at work, they are manufacturing a physique that will, ultimately, make them better laborers. Despite what might otherwise be one’s tendency to dismiss this claim as mere cynicism, the fact that so many major corporations have exercise facilities on site suggests there is more to this idea than what could even be perceived in the moment when he first penned this insight.

Other dimensions of time that appear—to the possessor—as free carry these contradictions as well. For instance, Adorno was unabashedly irritated by the idea that each person must have something s/he does simply to kill time. When asked, he
indicated he was genuinely astonished by the notion he should regularly engage in some frivolous activity simply to distract himself from some truer enterprise:

I have no hobby. Not that I am the kind of workaholic, who is incapable of doing anything with his time but applying himself industriously to the required task. But, as far as my activities beyond the bounds of my recognized profession are concerned, I take them all, without exception, very seriously. So much so that I should be horrified by the very idea that they had anything to do with hobbies - preoccupations with which I had become mindlessly infatuated merely in order to kill time - had I not become hardened by experience to such examples of this now widespread, barbarous mentality. Making music, listening to music, reading with all my attention, these activities are part and parcel of my life; to call them hobbies would make a mockery of them.

If indeed, as Adorno insists, we can have things we do in our free time that aren’t hobbies—if it’s true our escape from labor is nevertheless inextricably bound to that sphere of activity—what recourse exists for autonomy-oriented subjects and, most importantly, what insights might this analysis provide for Senegalese youth?

Since, at least from Adorno’s perspective, “free time” really isn’t free, it might be translated—into conceptual language—as “leisure” or “leisure time.” Doing so reminds us that, although human beings have engaged in all manner of games and recreation throughout their history, the idea of leisure as a domain of lived experience becomes institutionalized in large measure at the same moment that human beings are defined by their capacity for labor. In other words, this dialectic bound up in the making of capitalist modernity (Thompson 1963). This suggests, though, the sense of freedom that leisure entails hinges on a profound paradox. It is at once the promise of increased individual autonomy and the fact of being positioned in institutional hierarchies that structure one’s unequal relationship to others.
Still, while capitalist societies are structured by forms of labor that bear an unequal and competitive relationship to each other, these forms of work neither constrain subjects altogether or provide the prosperity they promise. Put another way, while free time is not the escape it is often imagine to be; the fact that leisure complements labor does not mean that is the only way it functions. In Adorno’s words: “the existence foisted upon people by society is identical neither with people as they are in themselves nor with all they could be” (Adorno 1991: 187). The absence of labor has implications for one’s overall ability to participate in the nation’s social institutions and for a person’s relative maturation. Yet leisure, as I have shown, also affords people who aren’t otherwise consumed with the burden of employment a creative capacity that can be used to rework social networks and, occasionally, the political infrastructure that governs the nation. Facing chronic un(der)employment, many Senegalese youth turn to sport. Others lend their energies to political participation, having more time to invest and very little to lose, materially, besides their lives (which, it seems in the context of economic desperation, they are willing to wager). It is, tragically, often the people who are most economically oppressed and politically disempowered who are most prone to auction their bodies—whether in athletic contests or for the purposes of organ donation. In this case, besides the body, time is the most precious youth can access (cf. Zhen 2000), and they use it both in creative capers of commodification, and to create impressive rituals of proficiency that undermine the widespread impression their days are completely a waste.

Venturing further afield, one can almost surmise the public discourse on lazy tea-drinking youth is more than an indictment of the group that seems the immediate target of this disdain. It constitutes a displaced commentary on a governmental apparatus
that has been, likewise, stagnant throughout much of the postcolonial period. In state formations that are rather different, the youth problem also assumes a different character altogether. The disappointing post-coup government of Uganda is widely remarked to be one characterized by a problem with child soldiers. Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Liberia are discussed in similar terms—all three have experienced military rule of one variety or another. In Senegal, the idea that youth sit around discussing issues with each other all day but are—in most respects—unproductive, parallels the impression that despite having a highly sophisticated political and legal system, this postcolonial nation has yielded economic and political developments that are thus far unremarkable. Especially since—and this is where the idea of being “lazy” comes in—many critics believe youth should take advantage of trade routes and forms of international commerce born from the government’s increased emphasis on economic liberalization and the expanding repertoire of sites for relocation the national population has pursued. This narrative, however, tends not to include those who perish in North Africa—metaphorically and literally the “desert”—for the many who try desperately, to make their way to Europe, often unsuccessfully. This all suggests that, despite the new actors and institutions now at play in the Senegalese postcolony, new opportunities for employment have not come close to matching those evacuated by the nation’s postcolonial agricultural collapse. One implication is that the state’s almost singular commitment to economic liberalization is certain to have increasingly catastrophic consequences, as urban areas become evermore crucial as sites for managing crisis (Brenner and Theodore 2002: 374). For Senegal, for even longer than other ostensibly socialist countries in Africa, has little investment in utopia and has pursued a pragmatic policy of economic liberalization in recent years
whose rising record of human casualties affirms that youth as *encombrements humains* [social obstructions] do not simply clog social arenas, but clutter the neoliberal imagination with reminders of the suffering some citizens soothe by drinking tea while they await politicians capable of serving them.
“Locked Up”: Senegalese (Im)mobility, post 9/11

The return

In 2004, the Senegalese-American hip hop rhythm and blues singer Akon soared to the top of music charts in the U.S. with the autobiographical gangsta ballad, “Locked Up.” The track chronicled his frustration with being surveilled, harassed, and ultimately imprisoned by U.S. law enforcement officials working in a national context where democracy is distributed so inconsistently that Akon was encouraged to engage in illicit economic activity then was punished for doing so.

Though Akon’s narrative centers on his experience in the U.S., the sense of captivity outlined in his hit song—with its chorus, “I’m locked up, they won’t let me out”—parallels events that took place in his native Senegal the previous year.

According to those interviewed, on the morning of July 8, 2003, U.S. military personnel arrived on Gorée Island around 4 a.m., accompanied by bomb-sniffing dogs. Soldiers evacuated homes and then searched them. As soon as they were finished, they moved most of the island’s residents onto a local football field.

Once the field was packed to capacity, people were sealed in by a barricade. Forced to spend the hottest hours of the day in the same spot, people suffered under the heat, trapped on a barren field, beneath the Senegalese sun, without any shade. The small satchels of water distributed haphazardly provided little relief for the crowd during the eight hours some of them spent in that spot—from nearly 6 a.m. to 2 p.m.—though the
visit, which lasted less than two hours, took place between 11 a.m. and 1 p.m. All
cellular phone communication was disabled during this time.

The reaction of the local population can be distilled into a single phrase that
appears frequently in transcripts from my interviews—*Da fa mêlni Diaam mo gna watt*—
which, when translated into English means:

“It was like slavery had returned.”

How should we understand this discourse on slavery more than one hundred and fifty
years after the institution was officially abolished in French territories? Why now, at a
time when Senegal is cultivating a relationship with the United States to empower itself
through ties with this superpower nation?

Despite the way U.S. civil liberties were reconfigured in the days, months, and,
now, years following the tragic events of September 11, 2001, this Senegalese scenario
provokes more questions than answers: Who designed the security measures taken for
Bush’s visit? Why did the Senegalese government comply? Under what conditions?
This repressive treatment contradicts the political congeniality that exists between George
W. Bush and Abdoulaye Wade. On several occasions, the U.S. Commander-in-Chief has
praised Wade for ruling the world’s most democratic Islamic country. Since the last
quarter of 2001, Senegal has become the foil for suspected terrorist nations everywhere as
Bush urges others to take notice and follow suit.

The U.S. President arrived at Gorée on board Wade’s presidential yacht. Are
cordial relations with the U.S. reserved only for the national leader? There is but one

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28 “The reenactment of the event of captivity,” indeed, as Saadiya Hartman insists, “contrives an
enduring, visceral, and personal memory of the unimaginable,” and not simply for people from the African
diaspora returning to Senegal as part of a heritage crusade, but also for this Senegal population, many of
whom acknowledged no previous link to the history of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, despite inhabiting a
region steeped in the history of its commercial transactions.
way to enter and exit Gorée. What exactly were security personnel concerned about? Did this community of people on a small island off the coast of Senegal really constitute a threat to U.S. national security? If not, how might we explain these events? How do they register in the Senegalese political imagination, if at all?

What does it mean that a football field was the setting where African bodies faced the coercive presence of U.S. power on Senegalese soil? In recent years, Senegal has gained international notoriety as a football powerhouse, especially after its upset victory over France in the 2002 World Cup. Really, for several years now, football has been one of the most effective ways for Senegal to distinguish itself—even assert its potential—to the world of nations.

In the way football is tied to Senegal’s international image, it is as if the government wants to suggest that, given the right resources and under the right conditions, it can perform as well politically and economically as the nation’s footballers have performed athletically with the resources given them. The ideology of sport, in other words, is not simply an attitude deployed locally but one that has folded back into the Senegalese political imagination with startling implications. This chapter is concerned with understanding the way this ideology of sport operates with regard to these two distinct but interconnected pursuits.

These differential aims are embedded in the ethnographic events and historical developments this chapter seeks to untangle by highlighting the shifting shape of Senegalese geopolitics and the country’s fascination with representing itself through sporting successes. To do this, I dribble back and forth between a series of overlapping events tied to Senegal’s response to the tragic events of 9/11, on the one hand, and the
country's aggressive 2002 World Cup bid and its Cinderella-esque victory over defending champions France in the opening round, on the other. After exploring these two distinct trajectories, I show the way they yield political anxieties that collapse clumsily into President George W. Bush's 2003 visit and become intensified through the way that moment is represented. I focus specifically on the trope of "slavery" as it emerges in local discourses since, as I will show, it is a key for understanding the forms of economic and symbolic value relevant to this scenario.

This sense that Senegalese actors might be corralled and exploited as a result of a political alliance with the United States contrasts sharply with the idea that increased liberalization of the national economy has afforded people the opportunity to travel overseas in search of financial opportunities—a narrative prominent in families who benefit from the elaborate international trade networks of the Murids and amongst Abdoulaye Wade's supporters. Paradoxically, Bush's visit to Senegal indexes the ugly underside of neoliberal globalization: its ability to fix some people, eliminating opportunities for social mobility, even while others are able to engage new economic enterprises. To elaborate this contradiction—and to illuminate the geopolitical transformations that render it legible—this chapter paper draws from several different kinds of evidence: speeches, interviews, and newspaper articles such as those I will now discuss, which help us understand why Senegal should be the stage for one of Bush's most significant campaigns against Islamic terrorism.

"Contre le terrorisme"

Before the tragic events of September 11, 2001 were even ten days old, Senegalese President Abdoulaye Wade had already formed an African coalition to fight terrorism.
What the nation lacked in firepower, it made up in enthusiasm. Positioning himself as the representative for several African nations, Wade declared that his coalition condemned the terrorist acts committed against the United States and made it clear that, following the lead of Western coalition fighting terrorism, he would create a committee of seven African nations dedicated to the same cause. This was a collective he expected to include, at least, the leaders of Nigeria, South Africa, and Algeria, as Wade assured the world he would do his part to ensure no African nation would finance or enable terrorist activities. This he considered not simply a Muslim affair; in fact, it was, in many ways, he considered it not a Muslim affair at all because the President remained convinced there were no terrorist activities of this sort operating in Senegal despite the fact that the country is more than 90% Muslim.  

By the time Wade’s summit was convened on the seventeenth of October in Dakar, it boasted fifteen African heads of state. The countries assembled created a “Déclaration de Dakar” ultimately signed by twenty-seven nations which expressed its  

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29 Wade’s determined position on the matter was not reflective of the nuanced, critical exchanges taking place in Senegalese popular media. Concerned by the way Bush’s coalition was driven by what seemed to many to be a divine right to fight, Cheikh Bamba Dioum published an article in Le Soleil entitled, “God bless the USA... and Afghanistan.” (Le Soleil, Friday, 12 October 2001. My italics.) Malick Ndiaye, Leader of the Collective Social Forces for Change, instead declared that he supported “neither Bush nor Ben Laden” in his L’info 7 piece (“Les partisans du ‘Ni Bush ni Ben Laden’ remettent ça aujourd’hui,” L’info 7 Wednesday, 7 November 2001). Islamic scholar Ebrahim Moosa (2006), more recently, noted parallels between the two adversaries:

"Both Bush and Bin Laden claim to have divine mandates, to have access to secret spiritual knowledge that obliges them to do certain things, even if those things run counter to their religions’ most basic ethical teachings. Both men claim they’re going to save people through their actions..." ("In God’s Name," The Sun, April 2006, Issue 364, p. 12) Moosa contends, furthermore, both men “believe they have messianic missions to fulfill” (Ibid.).


conviction that Africa remain free of all terrorist activity whether motivated by political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, or religious concerns. These countries considered the guidelines of the United Nations and the Organization of African Unity/African Union to offer the best protocol for fighting terrorism and recommended that the Pact Against Terrorism, proposed and coordinated by Senegal, be ratified through official protocol.\(^{32}\)

Senegal’s leadership in this regard was acknowledged by many, including the United States. Thirteen days later, George W. Bush would publicly affirm his appreciation for Africa’s efforts at the Forum for African Economic and Commercial Cooperation. In remarks the same day, Bush announced that he would start a 200 million dollar fund to stimulate private investment for countries in sub-Saharan Africa and was ready to offer American corporations certain protections against risk to encourage interest in the region.\(^{33}\)

Of course, African economic recovery was a prominent issue in the world that year. In January 2001, Wade had unveiled his *Omega Plan*, which stressed the need to improve physical and human capital in Africa, and to bring continent-wide development plans under the aegis of a single international authority (Nabudere 2002: 8). The project was formerly introduced to the public during an international conference six months later. Eventually the *Omega Plan* was combined with South African President Thabo Mbeki’s *Millennium Partnership for African Recovery Program* and the result was NEPAD, the

\(^{32}\)“Les chefs d’État réaffirment l’engagement...,” *Le Soleil* 18 Octobre 2001, p. 3.

\(^{33}\)Ibid. ‘M. Bush également annoncé la création d’un fonds de soutien des investissements privés dans la région...des garantie et une couverture du risque politique pour leurs projets en Afrique sub-saharienne.’
New Partnership for African Development, a program many donor nations, including the United States, has endorsed.

It is crucial to note that the U.S. only recently became a significant political supporter and financier of Senegal.\textsuperscript{34} And yet, the U.S. has so quickly become such an important benefactor that BBC News recently reported that French President Jacques Chirac was having talks with President Wade to “remind” him which country has historically been his greatest ally.

Close ties between the U.S. and Senegal, then, constitute a recent occurrence. While Senegal has operated differently from many socialist nations in its historic reluctance to align itself with other socialist or communist countries, it was never intimate with the United States either. But this trend started to change in the ‘80s, as Sheldon Gellar (1982: 82) noticed even then, “With its adamant opposition to any Soviet influence in Africa, the Reagan administration sees Senegal, which has sharply criticized Cuban and Soviet involvement in Angola and Ethiopia, as a friend and potential ally” (ibid: 83).\textsuperscript{35}

The “War on Terror” seems to have offered the perfect occasion to solidify this alliance: Bush’s $200 million investment fund sent a message that the U.S. approved and

\textsuperscript{34} Greg Mills (2004) cites the preponderance of paramilitary groups operating within the African continent, and the fact that NEPAD was ratified in October of 2001, as evidence that African leaders share with their Western counterparts an interest in fighting terrorism. It is doubtful that African Heads-of-State would envision their struggle against militia groups and rogue soldiers in the same uncompromising way that Bush envisioned his crusade against terrorism. Mills’ claim that, “[h]ad there never been a September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush arguably never would have made a visit to Senegal, South Africa” and other African countries (Mills 2004: 158), on the other hand, is compelling for a number of reasons.

\textsuperscript{35} It should be noted that Senegal also started to gain favor with the United States, during Reagan’s presidency, for its willingness to serve as a contingency landing site for space shuttle missions. During the presidency of George H.W. Bush, Senegal supported the U.S. by condemning the bombing of Pan Am flight 103, for which two Libyan men were convicted (although suspicions have been raised, subsequently, about the extent to which due process was upheld during the trial).
was prepared to offer its support both rhetorically and financially. To the extent that African nations are frequently expected to demonstrate their commitment to democracy as a precondition for receiving direct foreign assistance, this act could be taken as a sign that fighting terrorism is one way of producing democratic governance.

In this fight, Bush believed one either supported the cause or sabotaged it. In various international arenas, he worked to recruit allies. These domains did not have to be explicitly political: he threatened to boycott U.S. participation in the 2002 World Cup, for instance, if other nations did not demonstrate a satisfactory commitment to fighting against the encroachment of global terrorist networks.

Ultimately, however, Bush was pleased he decided not to do so because the U.S. national team performed exceptionally well during tournament competition and reached the quarterfinals. This was the subject of a friendly conversation with another world leader whose team had also done surprisingly well. As they met to discuss politics and, among other things, how exactly each country was planning to fight terrorism and promote democracy in the world, George W. Bush and Abdoulaye Wade joked that if both teams continued to excel in their respective divisions, the U.S. and Senegal would face off in the World Cup Championship.\(^\text{36}\) At the same time, football was becoming increasingly significant for Senegalese subjects locally.

Thus it seems that even as Senegal bolstered the appearance of its commitment to democracy through its own African-led war against terror, it was pursuing another course of action partially aimed at improving its national image with respect to other issues.

This leads us back to a question posed at the outset of this chapter: why did residents of Gorée Island experience slavery again for the first time on the island’s only football terrain? If so, what implications does this have for Senegalese politics?

To explore that question, I want to draw from certain key events surrounding the political campaign of President Abdoulaye Wade, on the one hand, and Senegal’s participation in the 2002 World Cup, on the other. If the events of Gorée provide any direction for my inquiry, it suggests that football plays an integral part in neoliberal circuits of exchange.

"Il faut travailler…"

In 2000, Abdoulaye Wade became Senegal’s third President because he managed to secure the support of Senegal’s most powerful and disaffected constituency: the youth. In a nation where more than 50% of the population is under the age of twenty (Diouf 1996) and where “urban youth” constitute more than 40% of the total 48% unemployed population, the youth labor problem is the nation’s most significant economic obstacle.

Wade intended for Senegalese youth to become the engine of national productivity—and production, more specifically. His inaugural speech, in which he referred to youth as the country’s most valuable “resource,” builds to a crescendo that closes with the motto that immediately made him famous: “There is no secret [to success]: you should work, work some more, work a lot—always work.”

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37 It is not altogether clear how this demographic label is being deployed. To the extent that “youth”—as a sociological moniker—often refers not simply to people of a certain age, but those who have not yet accessed well-recognized institutions of social reproduction, it could easily include teenagers up until persons whose ages hover around thirty—or beyond. What’s more, the term is typically gendered (male) and where more than one race is clearly defined, “youth” tend to be those who occupy the minority. Members of the adolescent majority are simply “children.”

38 Recent statistics provided by the United States Central Intelligence Agency. See www.cia-worldfactbook.com/senegal.
secret: *il faut travailler, encore travailler, beaucoup travailler, toujours travailler*.

Wade’s words were nevertheless memorialized and resurface in a number of popular *mbalax* songs throughout Senegal. “*Il faut travailler, beaucoup travailler, encore travailler, toujours travailler...*” is always the refrain.

The most popular song was made by the group Pape et Cheikh. But as the song ends, the chorus changes, the most significant word in the mantra being transformed by the writers’ efforts to index what they likely hope will be the outcome of all this hard work, “*Il faut gagner, encore gagner, beaucoup gagner, toujours gagner*” [You should win, win some more, win a lot, always win].

**“Le Sénégal qui gagne”**

As Senegal marched through the qualifying matches for the 2002 World Cup, national enthusiasm increased with every victory. Little wonder, then, that when the team finally qualified for the World Cup, there was pandemonium in the streets. An impromptu parade commenced as the Senegalese flooded downtown Dakar in celebration of this momentous achievement. For his part, President Wade cut short an official trip to France so he could party with the national team at home:

“At this time, it’s the most important thing that could happen to any country and I will join the team and the nation in celebrating by reducing the amount of time I was expected to stay in Paris.”

He offered, as well, his sentiments about the importance of this moment, “My deepest congratulations go to the courageous Lions who have made history for Senegal.”

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The President resurfaced in Senegal wearing the jersey of striker El-Hadji Diouf and joined the "madness" that characterized local celebrations, according to one spectator. A few days later, the President held a special ceremony and concert at the Presidential Palace, where each team member was presented a bonus of 10 million FCFA (then $15,000),\(^{40}\) this in addition to the cash rewards offered by the nation's wealthiest residents and families.\(^{41}\)

Entering World Cup competition was such a big deal for Senegalese football fans that star striker El-Hadji Diouf said it felt like "People in Senegal were as happy as if" the team had already "won the World Cup."\(^{42}\)

By the time World Cup play actually began the following year, the drama was heightened once fans realized Senegal was slotted to battle France. From the perspective of the nation's citizens, this athletic contest was saturated by its world-historical significance. As one supporter indicated, "Senegal-France is an historic match...This is the European country that colonized us. And, God willing, we will beat them."\(^{43}\)

The government, in its effort to galvanize support for the team, promoted the slogan that the Lions de Teranga—as the team is affectionately called—hail from "Le Senegal qui gagne" [The Senegal that wins].

Where the slogan came from is not altogether clear, but in the days, weeks, and months leading up to the match against France, the motto littered fliers, posters, and signs

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\(^{41}\) Ibid.

\(^{42}\) "Lions players rule in France," *British Broadcast News Sport* 13 August 2001.

across the country. *Le Sénégal qui gagne.* Once emblazoned across the nation, the phrase stuck.

El-Hadji Diouf, usually regarded the team’s best (though also certainly it’s most controversial) player, too, seemed to understand profoundly the political consequences of this postcolonial drama. As the team had swept through qualifying competitions on the strength of his eight goals, he found himself catapulted into the position to command the Senegalese forces for this important battle. “It’s like being the leader of a country,” he once said when asked to explain his feelings about this historic encounter.\(^{44}\)

So when Senegal pulled off the 0-1 upset victory, few could contain their excitement. Supporters crowded the innermost streets of Dakar gravitating, significantly, around Le Place de l’Indépendance and the Presidential Palace. Red, yellow, and green Senegalese flags, hats, scarves, t-shirts, and African-style boubous, were the only acceptable attire to commemorate the occasion.

Omar Ly would take the geopolitical significance of the win a step further. It was “a victory for black people everywhere,” as far as he was concerned. Though his understanding of what made this “black” victory momentous was colored by a very specific experience with racialized postcoloniality, as he explained, “I’m Senegalese, but I’ve lived in the U.S. and France. I’ve experienced racism. I’m so happy to be here for this.”\(^{45}\) Whether one is speaking of the old or the new superpower ally, this win communicated an important message.

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\(^{44}\) “Senegal in fever over World Cup debut,” *British Broadcast News Sport* 14 May 2002.

Yet the victory camouflaged what was a rather more ambivalent relationship between Senegal and its former colonizer. In the months leading up to the match, Khalilou Fadiga, who actually scored the game-winning goal, had gone on record saying how difficult it would be for him to play against France. As he explained to reporters, “The truth is that I know the streets of Paris better than the streets of Dakar.” Fadiga had left Senegal when he was six. He grew up in France. Beyond that, Fadiga reasoned, his parents are French. These factors would make it tough for him to line up against the representatives of a place that was so special to him, “but,” he was careful to add “if I play in the World Cup finals, I’ve got to try my best to beat them.”

Fadiga’s loyalties ultimately rested with his homeland, “I feel Senegalese,” he explained, “When I was home, everybody would speak our language and we listened to Senegalese radio and music. We ate Senegalese food.” The significance of his heritage even went beyond his acculturation, “I share both [French and Senegalese] cultures but I have a lot of family over in Senegal and my color is Senegalese.”46

Fadiga’s affectionate testimony highlights an important paradox. Many of the Senegalese players are at least as European as they are African; at the very least, most of them have honed their skills overseas. And, to the extent that they spend most of the year playing for European club teams—in France, Switzerland, and England—they are hardly ever in their home country.47 Yet they are its emissaries on important diplomatic missions, such as this one.


This seeming contradiction actually exposes a more significant and widespread feature of Senegalese social life: whether one is speaking of professional athletes, musicians, students, politicians, merchants, or professors, the persons occupying the highest ranks of power and wealth are those who spent some period of time “absent” from the nation. Socio-economic mobility in this context, in other words, means moving out to move up.

Despite this, the power of the win was impossible to deny. Suddenly, *Le Sénégal qui gagne* referred not simply to a nation with the ability to win, but one that had proved it could and was destined to do so. Supporters delivered the chant when welcoming the national team back home. Abdoulaye Wade was careful to use it in speeches. It was a slogan that, when offered, immediately invoked the euphoria attached to this victory. The motto followed the national team through World Cup competition.

The President was quick to associate himself with this turn of events. Immediately declaring a national holiday in honor of the team’s victory, Wade appeared at the national parade in a vehicle with the top open so everyone could see him juggling a football ball to commemorate this important event.

Having been in office only two years at that point, Wade’s presidency had coincided with Senegal’s eruption onto the world scene as a football team of renown. Making public note of his undying emotional and financial support for the squad, especially after this victory, made him into a national hero of sorts, even as it provoked criticism from his opposition, which remained disgusted at what they considered to be vulgar opportunism. “[O]ur president is trying to capture this performance of the Senegalese boys, but I think I it is very childish…because [this victory] is not the result
of" some “football policy,” said Amath Dansokho, leader of the Independence and Labor Party, part of Wade’s opposition.\textsuperscript{48} For some Senegalese, the President had done little—in terms of sports or politics—to influence the national athletic successes for which he credited himself.

Senegal would win again before tying a match and losing another to finally exit World Cup competition. But they had already made history affirming a place in the spotlight for themselves and their national leader.

What are we to make of the team’s success and of its ability to cast a positive spin on Abdoulaye Wade’s tenure at the nation’s helm? This athletic spectacle eclipsed the concerns of rural agriculturalists who had seen their peanut returns diminish steadily from the moment independence was achieved in 1960, when Senegal was one of the world’s leading producers of the crop. What of the recent resignation of the speaker of parliament, the government’s inability to cope with recurring energy shortages, or the fact that it had not yet found a way to replace the countless jobs lost to agricultural stagnation or quell the escalating numbers of young men who had been crowding urban areas for the past few decades in search of work as a result?

Without even offering an elaborate treatment of the gender issues under consideration, Dansokho indexes them by referring to the national team as “boys” and condemning Wade’s appropriation of their hard work. Indeed, one of the most prominent features of Senegalese neoliberalism has been the way it valorizes masculinity in projects imagined as being the most economically viable and successful.


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From overseas traders to athletes, Senegalese success stories frequently privilege male subjects with extensive access to foreign capital. This tendency is tied to the way Senegalese politics has been characterized, during the past several decades, by increased reliance on structural adjustment, donations from other nations, and revenues derived from the increased privatization of industries. This includes granting amnesty to Murids who make valuable donations to the government in return for tax leniencies. In this way, their holy city of Touba can even be considered, to a large extent, privatized.

But whether this is the most fruitful political course to pursue remains to be seen. Just as privatization has increased, so has the intensity of the nation’s employment slump. Meanwhile, the repertoire of alternatives that might effectively remedy this predicament have all but dissipated. And with that, the wealth gap and the increased marginalization of youth has been a dominant feature.

These events, for that reason, encourage us to challenge this intense adherence to neoliberal schemes despite the growing body of evidence that such a strategy, by itself, will likely yield few positive long-term results. Taking my cue from the way this ideology is entangled with the nation’s commitment to highlighting sporting successes, I have tentatively called this set of political commitments *gagnism*.

*Gagner* is, of course, the French verb meaning “to win.” Concerning Senegalese politics, the government is presently proceeding as if it believes neoliberal capitalism furnishes a set of rules that, when followed, will automatically yield the desired results. This is the same idea promoted in athletic competition, that a proper disciplinary regime automatically translates into victory (cf. Birdsall and Nellis 2003). For that reason, the parallels are startling.
Yet the ideology of gagnism is rather more elaborate than Senegal’s commitment to winning by pursuing this particular formula. To carry the analogy further, athletic competition always presumes an idealized subject, imagined to be best suited for certain sporting contests. Just as firms try their best to select athletes most capable of achieving the desired results, a key aspect of Senegalese neoliberalism involves convincing potential donors that it has achieved a form worthy of their investment. Every country is expected to fit a particular profile: democracy according to a particular definition, for instance. Otherwise, it is considered unfit for sponsorship and is, in these instances, disqualified from competition altogether. NEPAD, after all, “calls on African leaders to put their houses in order in exchange for foreign direct investment” (Owusu 2003: 1660, my emphasis).

Or one might consider one of the World Bank’s most recent poverty reduction efforts in Africa, the CDF or Comprehensive Development Framework. These measures were taken with the understanding that structural adjustment programs had been ill conceived and seldom successful. CDFs promote autonomy for countries receiving assistance, but they contain a selectivity predicated on the presence of a “good policy environment” that is so ambiguously defined it tends to undermine the program’s expressed guarantee of country ownership, restricting national autonomy (Pender 2001, Taylor 2005).

This male-focused image of “success,” the portrait of potential overseas exchange(s), and the emphasis on foreign investment accompanied by the corporate sponsorship of agencies located elsewhere all provide clues that might help explain why a football field was the site for the staging of the Bush-Wade neoliberal spectacle. But to
make sense of local discourses that index the horrors of slavery in the midst of Senegal’s quest toward economic and political liberalization, one must devote critical attention to the circumstances surrounding “the visit” that provoked comparisons with this region’s most inhumane traffic in human commodities.

Enslaving history

My friend, Bineta, was the one who explained to me the story of George W. Bush’s visit to Gorée Island. She told me the entire population of the island was taken to a football stadium and locked inside. I later learned it was a sandlot football field, barricaded to prevent escape. Yet, the way the image was transformed into a solid fortification as the story circulated suggests that participants conveyed a sense of being physically confined to that spot. In the popular imagination, the makeshift barriers became concrete enclosures.

And few people missed the profound irony that all this was taking place a few feet from the historic *Maison de Esclaves* [Slave Houses or Slave Dungeons\(^49\)], responsible for the tourism that usually provides this island economy’s primary revenue.

On this day, though, it seems it was the Senegalese people who paid a heavy price.

In recent years, some scholars have raised an eyebrow about Gorée’s historical legitimacy as a central port in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Recent work suggests the current site of the *Maison des Esclaves* served primarily as a private residence for one Anne Pépin (Hinchman 2004a: 49). Although Pepin sometimes engaged in various minor

\(^{49}\) These were “hellish dungeons” through which enslaved Africans passed on their way to the New World, according to a brochure advertising the Cape Coast and Elmina slave houses (Hartman 2002: 760).
forms of overseas exchange and occasionally held enslaved Africans in the basement of the residence (Hinchman 2004b), the *Maison* was not the pivotal site of Atlantic dispersion it is often imagined to be (Austen 2001). Given all this, the slavery discourses that emerged in the aftermath of July 8; 2003, seem at best exaggerated, at worst, unjustified.⁵⁰

The Bush visit, though, ultimately hinges on a profound historical irony: the technique of coercion used to subdue Senegalese peoples in that moment was a more reliable reproduction of the way enslavement occurred on Gorée Island than any event that has ever occurred at the *Maison des Esclaves*, for slavery in this locale typically did not proceed through dungeons and warehousing. Instead, enslaved Africans were usually hoarded together and bound in open-air “captiveries” (Samb, ed. 1997),⁵¹ awaiting placement onto ships that would send them across the Atlantic. Besides a few invited guests, the Senegalese people present on Gorée on July 8, 2003 were treated similarly.

Scholars have, as yet, not devoted much attention to the Bush visit or its historical resonance with the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in terms of the way the experience of being corralled in a football stadium has become inscribed in the Senegalese popular imagination. Despite the fact we are now in a rather different historical epoch, a good deal remains to be learned, I think, from the infrastructure(s) through which capital—

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⁵⁰ Bayo Holsey’s 2003 work on slave tourism to Ghana reveals the cleavage between the absence of historical work on the slave trade in Ghanaian educational curricula and the diasporic discourses prevalent among African Americans that encourage them to visit Cape Coast and Elmina to confront a key point of departure for their ancestors who, it is believed, embarked on a Transatlantic journey to the Americas from these sites (cf. Richards 2005).

symbolic and economic—continues to circulate in trans-Atlantic circuits, and the political networks that make these forms of exchange possible.

Though American publications spoke of Bush’s address as one directed at Senegalese peoples, most of them were too busy (fighting heat exhaustion) and too far removed (from the Gorée Island museum) to hear the address. The speech is nevertheless important to analyze because it had a purpose and an audience. For these reasons, it is useful to consider how these events could be read from the vantage of Senegal’s new relationship with the U.S.

“Bring[ing]…hope where there is suffering…”

“With the power and resources given to us, the United States seeks to bring peace where there is conflict, hope where there is suffering, and liberty where there is tyranny. And these commitments bring me and other distinguished leaders of my government across the Atlantic to Africa.”

George W. Bush, in his address at Gorée Island

The U.S. Commander-in-Chief immediately situated his remarks in the context of the history of Trans-Atlantic slavery:

For hundreds of years on this island, peoples of different continents met in fear and cruelty. Today we gather in respect and friendship, mindful of past wrongs and dedicated to the advance of human liberty.

“Respect and friendship,” under these conditions, can only be considered a broad rubric for the warm political relationship between the two countries and the relative neutrality with which Bush perceives Senegal. It seems to suggest, in other words, the country is not considered a force hostile to U.S. interests. And yet, such phrasing makes the situation unfolding all about the U.S. President, in island real-time, intensely contradictory and confusing. For, if this coercive treatment constitutes “respect and friendship” how would the U.S. leader have addressed an antagonistic population?
At this place, liberty and life were stolen and sold. Human beings were delivered and sorted, and weighed, and branded with the marks of commercial enterprises, and loaded as cargo on a voyage without return. One of the largest migrations of history was also one of the greatest crimes of history.

Below the decks, the middle passage was a hot, narrow, sunless nightmare; weeks and months of confinement and abuse and confusion on a strange and lonely sea. Some refused to eat, preferring death to any future their captors might prepare for them. Some who were sick were thrown over the side. Some rose up in violent rebellion, delivering the closest thing to justice on a slave ship. Many acts of defiance and bravery are recorded. Countless others, we will never know.

Here Bush endorses resistance as a feasible strategy for Africans who refuse to accept their own captivity. Perhaps Bush believes that, when faced with a “crim[inal],” tyrannical regime people ought to pursue their freedom by any means necessary?

And yet, Senegal became an important U.S. ally at this historical juncture because of President Wade’s expressed disdain for Islamic jihads waged by Muslims who see the United States as an imperial regime. These adversaries would likely position themselves against the superpower as its victims, like the Africans who were objectified as part of “commercial enterprise.” But Bush certainly is not speaking of them. The “War on Terror” has been about identifying rogue militants associated with the axis of evil, not commending people who declare themselves revolutionaries in the face of a political superpower. This phraseology, then, applauds a nebulous sense of resistance that does not correspond to any particular historical actors or events. Perhaps this explains why no specific personages or sites of struggle are named, though Bush would be more specific at other moments in his speech.

Those who lived to see land again were displayed, examined, and sold at auctions across nations in the Western Hemisphere. They entered societies indifferent to their anguish and made prosperous by their unpaid labor. There was a time in my country's history when one in every seven human beings was the property of another. In law, they were regarded only as articles of commerce, having no right to travel, or to marry, or to own
possessions. Because families were often separated, many were denied even the comfort of suffering together ...

...In America, enslaved Africans learned the story of the exodus from Egypt and set their own hearts on a promised land of freedom. Enslaved Africans discovered a suffering Savior and found he was more like themselves than their masters. Enslaved Africans heard the ringing promises of the Declaration of Independence and asked the self-evident question, 'then why not me?'

In this passage, Bush establishes a parallel between the African people of Senegal and the African-descended peoples of the United States. Such a move is strategic, rhetorically, since just a few months before, the U.S. government was criticized for leaving a United Nations conference on racism in Durban, South Africa where, many believed, it would have been asked to issue a formal apology for its participation in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and deliver a formal statement concerning its position on the issue of reparations for African-descended peoples. By establishing a correlation between African Americans and Senegalese Africans, Bush commends the latter while paying homage to the former; yet he avoids detailing a specific commitment to either population.

In this same phrasing, Bush also speaks of the Church’s role in the slave trade but does not condemn it. Instead of suggesting that Christianity has a problematic history where African people are concerned, he puts forth the argument that the European Christians were not Christian enough. Thus, Africans who discerned spiritual lessons in the Bible taught Christians what they really needed to learn about humanity, so all those “generations of oppression” could not “defeat the purposes of God.”

In the struggle of the centuries, America learned that freedom is not the possession of one race. We know with equal certainty that freedom is not the possession of one nation. This belief in the natural rights of man, this conviction that justice should reach wherever the sun passes leads America into the world...

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African peoples are now writing your own story of liberty. Africans have overcome the arrogance of colonial powers, overturned the cruelties of apartheid, and made it clear that dictatorship is not the future of any nation on this continent. In the process, Africa has produced heroes of liberation -- leaders like Mandela, Senghor, Nkrumah, Kenyatta, Selassie and Sadat. And many visionary African leaders, such as my friend, have grasped the power of economic and political freedom to lift whole nations and put forth bold plans for Africa's development.

Armed with the appreciation for truth and justice achieved through the activism of African-descended peoples in the U.S., who worked alongside concerned whites, the United States government is apparently now using its "power and resources" to introduce "peace" and "end conflict" in ways that are especially beneficial to African people. But the millennial captiveries at Gorée show all too well which definition of "peace" (or Diaam) is being promoted here.

Bush's haste to link African people to the American quest for "freedom" forces him to misspeak. Instead of saying that "African people are now writing 'their' own story of liberty" he insists that "[As] African people [you] are now writing your own story of liberty..." and yet most of the Africans on Gorée that day experienced liberty's dialectical opposite.

What's more, this narrative of "liberty" is one that features most prominently the African "fathers" of independence, which include the first Senegalese President Leopold Sedar Senghor and someone Bush refers to as his "friend," who remains unnamed although he is most likely referring to current Senegalese President Abdoulaye Wade, who he commends for having "grasped the power of economic and political freedom to lift whole nations and put forth bold plans for Africa's development." By this statement, Bush affirms his support for NEPAD, an initiative that, in the words of Francis Owusu (2003: 1655), "support[s] neoliberalism and sees global integration as the key to Africa's
development” (see also Nabudere 2002, Taylor 2005). Wade was one the main architects of the proposal and is one of its biggest supporters in Africa.

Because Africans and Americans share a belief in the values of liberty and dignity, we must share in the labor of advancing those values. In a time of growing commerce across the globe, we will ensure that the nations of Africa are full partners in the trade and prosperity of the world. Against the waste and violence of civil war, we will stand together for peace. Against the merciless terrorists who threaten every nation, we will wage an unrelenting campaign of justice. Confronted with desperate hunger, we will answer with human compassion and the tools of human technology. In the face of spreading disease, we will join with you in turning the tide against AIDS in Africa.

We know that these challenges can be overcome, because history moves in the direction of justice. The evils of slavery were accepted and unchanged for centuries. Yet, eventually, the human heart would not abide them. There is a voice of conscience and hope in every man and woman that will not be silenced -- what Martin Luther King called a certain kind of fire that no water could put out. That flame could not be extinguished at the Birmingham jail. It could not be stamped out at Robben Island Prison. It was seen in the darkness here at Gorée Island, where no chain could bind the soul. This untamed fire of justice continues to burn in the affairs of man, and it lights the way before us.

May God bless you all.

And, with that benediction, Bush ended the address. But who was Bush addressing anyway? The speech was ostensibly directed to the people of Senegal, but those in the immediate vicinity could not hear him, held captive as they were in a football field a short distance away. Given the way they had been locked away, perhaps they were not his intended audience at all. Instead, the speech seemed directed toward certain idealized national and international subjects.

What was he saying to them? According to the view he articulated, Africa’s descendants overseas were, by that time, American; they therefore no longer needed to be separated out. Here, the U.S. President was probably referring to African Americans, who he assumed to have joined his “unrelenting campaign for justice” without hesitation. But in speaking of a shared commitment to “dignity...[i]n a time of growing commerce
across the globe,” he was also indexing the legacy of Senegalese traders in the U.S., by now so prevalent that a section of Harlem’s renowned 125th street marketplace had become known locally as *Le Petit Sénégal*. A brief respite from the Bush speech might provide the opportunity to elaborate some of the contradictions highlighted in this particular passage.

While theorizing the commercial activities of Senegalese actors in U.S. commercial spheres, some scholars have been complicit in reproducing the erroneous notion that their success grows from a work ethic that sets them apart from their African American peers operating in similar spheres. At times, the problematic intellectual position that sustains this idea is a sin of omission (Buggenhagen 2003); elsewhere, some authors actually recycle this racial stereotype. “Entering legally, working furtively, leaving harmlessly,” the Senegalese trader, in Joel Millman’s (1997: 180) account, “challenges every [negative] assumption about ‘controlling our borders’ or ‘stealing our jobs.’” The anthropologist Paul Stoller (2002: 88-90), in his own discussion of Senegalese traders in New York City, troubles the assumption they are all law-abiding citizens but nevertheless imbues them with a devotedness to their work ethic, which implies that other actors occupying the African American communities in which they tend to operate (Millman 1997: 177) do not achieve the same success because they do not apply themselves to the same principles. When these merchants first arrived in the Big Apple for commercial opportunities in the early 1980s, Stoller argues, they immediately applied to the Consumer Affairs Board for vending licenses. As a result of the excessive harassment state agents rained upon them, these traders quickly racked up thousands of dollars worth of fines. As a result, these vendors allowed their licenses to expire “but
continued their operations outside the regulatory aegis of New York City” (Stoller 2000: 88). This is a success story in Stoller’s telling despite the fact that these merchants had willingly entered the unregulated world of the informal economic sector (Ibid.: 90). Rather than an indication of the forms of economic and racial marginalization black subjects are likely to encounter in the U.S., Stoller and others consider this one more example of the way “West African merchants in New York City use their familial traditions to construct long-distance trade networks in North America.” Stoller is especially interested in the way African actors use the perceived cultural impoverishment of African Americans against them—as a strategy for marketing “Afrocentricity” (Stoller 2000: 90). Little regard is shown here for the way African Americans might manage similar forms of exclusion or the moments when Senegalese traders and African Americans embrace shared categories of racial and cultural identification—and illicit enterprise.

By contrast, when Akon released the hit single “Locked Up” in 2004, he was joined by the African American rapper Styles P. Styles P, who, to date, has garnered more critical attention than commercial sales, is well known for gritty tales about the drug trafficking and for his critique of hypocrisy in the criminal justice system. Thus, it is significant that Akon summoned him for a song that discussed his own trials and tribulations with law enforcement officials. The album that featured the song tellingly titled, “Trouble,” hit shelves soon after Akon was released for prison after serving time for grand theft auto. Subsequently, he formed the label “Konvict Musik” and showed up in songs from a range of rap artists—from Snoop to Young Jeezy to Eminem—between 2004 and 2006. In 2005, Styles P joined Akon in Dakar for a concert, during which time
the artist visited Wade in the presidential palace. In this moment, the artist embodied the Senegalese emigrant’s success story: born in Dakar to famed jazz percussionist Mior Thiam, Akon went to the U.S. at age 12 and eventually became a top-selling recording artist. Yet, it is crucial not acknowledge the illicit economies in which he cut his teeth alongside African American actors facing depressed economic circumstances. Without even condoning or encouraging criminal activity, one ought to acknowledge that Senegalese actors living and working in the U.S. are not simply “astute entrepreneurs” who seize the “economic advantage” to be gained from the new forces of “global restructuring” (Stoller 2000: 88-90), despite being categorized as such not simply in much of the anthropological literature, but in Bush’s Gorée Island address, to which I now return.

With regard to the people of Senegal, the U.S. President emphasized in his remarks the need to make them “full partners in the trade and prosperity of the world.” The alternative—not being “full partners…in…trade”—is linked, in this discourse, to all manner of social problems, including the spread of AIDS and civil wars—both infectious diseases that, apparently, run rampant in Africa. Not to “move in [this] direction,” too, is to fuel the efforts of “merciless terrorists;” and Senegal’s historic mission would not allow it to do that, given the way its present geopolitical projects dovetail with the spirit that sustained both Martin Luther King, Jr. in his Birmingham jail and Nelson Mandela in his Robben Island cell. These leaders endured these forms of incarceration to awaken a sense of “hope” that dwells in the “human heart” of every “man and woman.”

Bush’s message was apparently directed at all segments of the population, which explains its gender-inclusive phraseology. Yet, the leaders mentioned were all men.
How are Senegalese women to understand the part they play in the “full partnership” the country’s historical arc is leading it to embrace in the world? Will this “partnership” be realized, as well, in the lived spaces with which they are familiar? Or, does their exclusion here correspond to the way the enslavement of Senegalese people is hidden and silenced as a seemingly necessary part of this new economic enterprise?

What of the specific images used to anchor Bush’s address, in particular the sense communicated toward the end of the speech that one important civil rights and another anti-apartheid leader dramatize and communicate to the world a powerful message of “hope”? This address throws one particular question into stark relief: Who maintains the message of “hope” for the Senegalese peoples incarcerated, during that same moment, in the center of the island where they reside?

Apparently, this question is not mine alone: the French word for “hope” [ESPOIR] was scrawled on the wall of the Gorée Island site where Senegalese peoples were detained.

This word has a special significance for me, based on my researches and travails in Senegal. As I moved back and forth between my base in Chicago and my research site, friends would invariably ask what I could do to facilitate their career pursuits. The word “espoir” was always used to articulate their aspirations.

My sculptor friend Lamine, for instance, once asked if I might be interested in going into business with him. If I could front the money for him to make a major purchase of wood from Mali, he suggested, he could produce a number of sculptures in bulk and split the profits with me. He knew it was more of a long-term investment, but he was sure we both stood to gain.
“I know it’s a lot to ask, Michael,” he conceded, “But you’re my last hope [dernier espoir].”

Some months after my first visit to Senegal in 2002, I received a letter from Pierre, a security guard in the home where I had stayed. He was writing to ask if I knew of any security or law enforcement opportunities in the U.S. for which he might be suited. As the letter drew to a close he, too, made sure to indicate that I was his dernier espoir [last hope].

Significantly, I think, the phrase of note was dernier espoir—always in French, even for my friends who really only spoke Wolof and conceded they were barely literate in French.

The term, espoir, as an index of desperation, stood apposite another term that was used to articulate the prospect of prosperity: gagner.

Lamine and Pierre (who don’t know each other), both used to say they needed my assistance was because, in Senegal, it was difficile à gagner quelque chose [difficult to find something]. A former basketball player I once interviewed expressed the same distress. “In Senegal,” Ibrahim told me in Wolof, “It is difficult to find [gagner] a job unless you are well-placed [bien placé].” The phrase difficile à gagner quelque chose, though relatively simple, resists translation. The sense being communicated here is that it is “hard to find something” or “difficult to find work.” But the word gagner was usually deployed by interviewees to speak about prospects for earning money. They hoped this or that opportunity would enable them to “earn” an income. Gagner, then, means at once to “find,” “win,” or “earn,” revenue. And, like espoir, it is a sentiment that, for whatever reason, made more sense to communicate in French than through a Wolof equivalent.
It is in this context that being imprisoned on Gorée Island during a visit from the leader of the world’s foremost superpower reminded Senegalese citizens of the extent to which they are “trapped” in a particular marginal economic and political position, just as it led others to the conclusion that, although it was “unjust,” it was something the country “needed” if it is to gain stature in the world of nations.

In this time of economic desperation, moments like the Bush visit emerge as opportunities for the nation to attract the kind of capital commitment that could, potentially, reverse its economic course. But this discussion has not yet comprehensively addressed the matrix of aims and interests embedded in this scenario. What, after all, is the significance of the speech staged at Gorée Island, and why should this event be privileged in the effort to theorize Senegalese neoliberalism? As yet it is not possible to fully discern its motivations but this speech act, but its being organized around the theme of “enslavement” speaks profoundly to Senegal’s historic place in an Atlantic economic formation and the role to which it aspires in the contemporary incarnation of this triangulation. The victims of the “enslavement” that characterized the 2003 visit might be skeptical of the message being promoted but, in the current political climate, a message need not be well received to achieve a meaningful transformation between two collective entities. Increasingly, in fact, it is the “abortive rituals”—infelicitous acts that nevertheless resonate with subjects because of what they superficially signify (Trouillot 2000)—that help people “erase” past actions that would otherwise undermine present pursuits.
Qui gagne?—The Neoliberal Subject in Senegal

In thinking through the events that transpired at Gorée, one is inclined to wonder why George W. Bush mentioned the events of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in his speech at all.

The precise motivations driving the production and reception of this political performance are difficult to discern, but it should be noted that this kind of narrative has become more frequent in recent years (Brooks 1999). As Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2000: 171) explains, “Collective historical apologies are increasing worldwide...these rituals of apology create pastness by connecting existing collectivities to past ones that either perpetrated wrongs or were victimized”; although, frequently, the events to which these “apologies” refer have taken place several centuries before. It is not always clear, then, which addressees are the focus of these speech events. But given that the point about such claims may be less what they assert than the fact of their assertion” (Trouillot 1995: xvii), we might look for the true significance of these performances in the structure of the message and its relationship to the historical context this kind of utterance tries to construct, “As transformative rituals, apologies always involve time...[t]hey mark a temporal transition: wrong done in the past is recognized as such, and this acknowledgement itself creates or verifies a new temporal plane, a present oriented toward the future” (Trouillot 2000: 174, cf. Hartman 2002: 759). Indeed, from the ethnographic evidence marshaled above, it seems that subjects from both Senegal and the United States were interested in using evidence of a “wrong done in the past”—in this case, the Trans-Atlantic traffic in human beings—to erect “a present oriented toward” a mutually beneficial future.
But though Trouillot’s important work on these kinds of vocal rituals helps us to understand what is at stake in these speech acts, his term for them—“historical apologies”—is something of a misnomer in this case. After all, Bush did not actually apologize for slavery during his visit to Senegal. In fact, the U.S. President faced criticism for not apologizing for the nation’s participation in this cruel exchange, an admission many people felt was long overdue. Ultimately, if we review the transcript from George W. Bush’s speech above, it is possible to chronicle the elaborate lyrical gymnastics he undertook to elaborate the horrors of the slave trade without actually offering an apology.

If indeed, as Trouillot suggests, apologies are used to create “pastness” between the perpetrator and recipient of a “wrong,” perhaps this sheds light on the reasons why the United States has never been able to offer a formal apology for slavery, neither at the United Nations Conference on Racism where the U.S. delegation left early, nor on this fateful day at Gorée. Maybe there is something about the historical trajectory of U.S. political and economic ambitions that renders slavery inhumane but prevents it from being considered “wrong.” Maybe, even beyond the widely acknowledged point that slavery and freedom are the conditions of each other’s possibility (Morgan 1975), it is true that slavery is a form of economic extraction that is difficult to disentangle from the structure of capitalism (Graeber 2006) although, in popular discourses, the latter is imagined as having successfully moved beyond it. This is a sorry state of affairs, although apologies of the kind we see here—even when they are felicitous—serve only to
undermine and eclipse present wrongs. With an eye to forensics, we might conclude “slavery” emerges as a way to categorize the kind of injustices perpetrated on Gorée Island because it seems an appropriate way to recognize the symbolic and economic exchanges taking place between the U.S. and Senegal that occurred in this moment. For a discourse on slavery is always a commentary across regimes of value: the interior emotional complexity of the human condition versus the economic value that can potentially be extracted from physical bodies.

Because to the extent that many African postcolonies are in the curious position of having to demonstrate a certain fitness for democracy as a prerequisite for material benefits, these symbolic displays have concrete economic consequences. Countries like Senegal cannot simply promise they are committed to democracy, their devotion to this political ideal must be demonstrated, much like the way a legal promise cannot simply be affirmed, but requires the additional element of “material consideration.” William Pietz (2002) offers an example that, in the interest of brevity, makes this point forcefully. In referring to a film from the film The Client, Pietz describes a scene where a young boy who will stand trial for his knowledge of a mob murder “hires a sympathetic lawyer by handling her a crumpled dollar bill.” As he explains:

The real transfer of even this nominal sum can cause a contractual relationship, in this case the lawyer-client relation, to come into existence... Although she accepts the dollar, the lawyer does not regard it as a partial payment for her services. It is just [a retainer,] the technical requirement for establishing the contractual relationship.

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52 “Crime,” as Malcolm Gladwell cautions us to remember, “...isn’t a single discrete thing, but a word used to describe an almost impossibly varied and complicated set of behaviors” (2006: 138).

53 Recall the scene in Voltaire’s (1991) Candide when a mutilated slave who has escaped from a plantation in Surinam confronts the novel’s young protagonist to display fleshy scars that remind him, “It is at this price that you eat sugar in Europe”—and that Senegal might enjoy their slice of the neoliberal pie.
On the face of it, the scenario discussed here has little to do with Senegal, or the events that took place on June 8, 2003. No formal legal document was prepared to confirm Senegal’s commitment to democracy or even to assure that the U.S. would serve as this country’s representative in any legal arena. Still, the population of Gorée—in being packaged and presented using the same techniques deployed by those who enslaved Africans centuries ago—appear as so much collateral that, while not exchangeable in any concrete form, provides Senegalese consent to the terms of this informal contractual arrangement. Which is why, although, “The requirement to give up control over some material object that in value might be a mere trifle might sound like a pointless formality or an empty ritual left over from a more primitive age; in fact,] consideration...as a positive doctrine and concrete legal reality...has survived to the present day both as a legal object in judicial decisions and,” even more appropriate for our purposes, “as a practical reality in social transactions” (Pietz 2002: 39). In this “transaction,” Bush traded on the spectral capital afforded by Senegalese citizens who were virtually enslaved for his own purposes: to cleanse his image of any culpability concerning the legacy of the U.S. participation in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, ironically, by re-staging the exchange of bonded Africans.

It might seem curious to theorize this virtual contract through the lens of “consideration” since there was no formal exchange as there is in the case of a legal

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54 That such a legal concept could nevertheless fit this scenario so appropriately makes one question whether this militaristic spectacle is evidence of the way “force ‘trumps’ law” or if “the very concept of law” if, indeed, “juridical reason itself, includes a priori a possible recourse to constraint or coercion and, thus, to a certain violence” (Derrida 2005: xi).

55 These Senegalese “slaves,” then, might be considered “virtual commodit[ies]” (Trouillot 1994: 345).
retainer, mentioned above. Yet, in Anglo-American law, where the notion of “material consideration” operates, it is not crucial that the second party formally take possession of the valuable objects(s). “Consideration is a social fact brought into being by the voluntary alienation of a valuable material object” (Pietz 2002: 38):

What is necessary for an enforceable contract is [only] that the person receiving the promise...effectively separates himself from something valuable under his control. The person making the promise need not actually take possession of it. She need only agree that this alienation of an object of material value [in this instance: a horde of ‘enslaved’ Africans]...is an acceptable consideration (Ibid.).

Apparently, such an agreement is “acceptable” to Wade, who hopes to access U.S. financial resources, and Bush, who stands to benefit from the Senegalese cultural capital, through a spectacle staged in the crucible of Senegalese national aspiration: a football field, some miles off the coast of Senegal, on an island that lies in the Atlantic.

If, indeed, “sport is the art of competition” (Early 1996: 5), neoliberalism is nevertheless a game with more losers than winners. What’s more, it’s difficult to trust the referees. And even when people genuinely believe they are playing fair, they sometimes overlook the fact that it’s hard to compete with shackles around your feet.

This tension between slavery and neoliberal freedom, play and imprisonment, structures the contradictory experience of economic transformation in postcolonial. If football is the means by which the state casts a unified image of success, basketball is often the vehicle through which athletes and corporate entities strive to achieve it.
Les lionnes rêvent du monde:  
Basketball and the anatomy of (post)national fantasy

Basketball: The choice of a new generation

“The nature of the object...is not as important as its potential use for statelike activity in the cultural realm.”

Wahneema Lubiano (2002)

For St. Michel’s renovation campaign of 1978, the collège enlisted the services of a prestigious alumnus—famed architect Pierre Goudiaby. Goudiaby is the proprietor of an exclusive boutique in the exquisite Champs-Elysées commercial district in Paris, where he sells hand-made sculptures based on his designs. The Goudiaby home is one of Dakar’s most beautiful architectural enterprises, its modern façade contrasting with structures more closely intertwined with Senegal’s Islamic legacy.

But Goudiaby’s most notable achievement, to date, is the national monument at the Corniche, next to the beach one passes on her way downtown from the primary residential section of Dakar. The monument, an adaptation of Rodin’s thinker, plays flute while crouching peacefully with its back to the Atlantic against a triangular shape that indexes this sculpture’s position at the summit of Senegalese symbolic arts.

Nearly all of Goudiaby’s sculptures share the same basic design as the national monument—they are all “thinkers,” engaged in activity of one kind or another. His trademark is the androgynous, anonymous person, ostensibly a figure that consolidates the nationalist project that was independence through the ambiguity of its form.

For his alma mater, however, Goudiaby broke from this tradition. In the exterior walls of St. Michel, he inscribed the silhouette of two basketball players, one female, the
other male, as signified by their hairstyles. The two figures—whose upper bodies alone are represented—are playing one-on-one basketball.

This image provokes a series of questions, all germane to the discussion that follows. Why meaning can we glean from Goudiaby’s break from his characteristic symbolism for this particular project? Why are his figures playing basketball? Why was he so careful to use one male and one female player? This chapter pursues themes that overlap with these concerns. Because although basketball never became Senegal’s most popular national sport—traditional wrestling (lutte traditionnal)\(^5\) and football share that distinction—it emerged in concert with, and was fueled by, the enthusiasm that accompanied Senegal’s quest for independence. Rather than focus on the specific aims and ambitions that structured St. Michel’s renovation project, thus, I am interested to explore how the history of basketball in Senegal is implicated in the idea of the former colony as a new nation-state. Basketball’s (inter)national infrastructure provides a lens through which to understand the efforts to consolidate national resources and refashion the self that accompanied this historical quest. But as there is little archival evidence that explicitly chronicles the relationship between the Senegalese government and nation’s basketball industry, I work in and around certain nodes in the athletic complex to fashion a theory about the dialectical constitution of this sport against the institutional context of authority in which it thrives.

My effort to grapple, more specifically, with the way Senegalese male and female basketball players produce themselves in this social matrix borrows from Saidiya

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\(^5\) A popular phrase used to reference the fight against Senegal’s most pressing social problem borrows from this national spectacle. See for instance, “Priorité à la lutte contre le chômage,” Walfadri Jeudi 13 Avril 2000.
Hartman's powerful insight that simple and complicated rituals combine in moments of historical transformation to form a series of related contexts through which populations are produced and differentiated hierarchically (1997). "The call to subjectivity," she argues, must be "understood also as a call to subjection[,] and subjugation and appeals for redress or protection to the state or to the structure or idea of citizenship...are always already embedded in the structure they would escape" (Moten 2003: 2, cf. Hartman 1997). The idea of Senegal as a national frame that citizens and subjects have differential difficulty trying to "escape" is crucial for understanding why young men find their way overseas far more easily than their female counterparts, as the ethnographic and archival material considered here reveals. These important issues urge us to consider the role of basketball in postcolonial Senegal and the gendered dynamics of the sport because to the extent that Goudiaby was careful to ensure equal representation, the analyst must wonder whether that effort was evidence of the world he knew or one he saw fit to pioneer.

National projects, as Wahneema Lubiano (2002: 157) insists, often articulate "a fantasy for a better future." In making use of the term 'fantasy', I do not mean to reference an idea that 'has no meaning' (Cole and Guy-Sheftall, 2003: 187). Instead, my concept of fantasy, while modified, builds on the work of Lubiano and that of Lauren Berlant (1991: 5) who uses the term to describe 'the way national culture becomes local—through the images, narratives, monuments, and sites that circulate through personal/collective consciousness'. Admittedly, '[t]here is no one logic to a national

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57 Here, of course, this idea is complicated by a juridical legacy of distinguishing between French colonial citizens having the same rights and entitlements as members of the empire located elsewhere, and subjects afforded a sense of political participation that was rather more restrictive (Mamdani 1996)—but more on that below.
form, but, rather, many simultaneously “literal” and “metaphorical” meanings, stated and unstated’. This chapter considers some of the “state-ments” (Comaroff 1998) that help constitute the particular gendered and generational quality of Senegal’s postcolonial state.

With an eye to these issues, I am most interested in the way basketball functions as a window into several related postcolonial projects. After all, Goudiaby is not the only person for whom basketball is useful. Emerging at a key moment in Senegal’s quest for independence, basketball has been deployed by different firms eager to reposition themselves, in Senegal and internationally, at key sites in the global infrastructure of this competitive sport. While football remains the primary vehicle through which nationalist inclinations are aroused—basketball, during the past few decades, has become increasingly popular among individual athletes and agencies or corporations who see in this sport the opportunity to establish new networks and the chance to access to new economic resources available elsewhere during the nation’s prolonged employment crisis. Basketball has become the locus for these aims, gaining social prominence during two different key moments in the nation’s economic history: first, during a time when the possibilities of independence become increasingly easy to imagine, then again more recently, as recruiters and journalists from the United States have become more mobile in pursuit of “tomorrow’s” basketball superstar (chapter 5). And as local coaches and athletic directors prepare the athletes they hope to place in the different slots international basketball makes available, Senegalese youth draw from the mediated commodity images and products that circulate locally to develop forms of recreation through which they renegotiate their relationship to their own bodies and—more abstractly—to the idea of time in the postcolony. In the process, the male basketball player, because of his almost
unqualified access to “free time” has become a national icon of aspiration, formed in
discrete contexts where athletes enhance their skills and hatch plans to escape the
country’s confines. Thus by playing basketball in Senegal, one is set against a neoliberal
backdrop concerned with opportunities to generate capital that lie elsewhere—chances to
score that are inflected by assumptions about the racial characteristics that leave these
athletes predisposed to success. By setting the local history of this sport against the
historical transformation of political ideologies promoted by the national government, I
hope to show how these trajectories overlap, especially in the way they imagine the state
to be devoid of the resources needed to regenerate it.

The argument I develop here considers some broad features of Senegalese
democracy before closing in on one frequent, but thus far unexplored, aspect of
statecraft: the use of treason accusations as a technology for reconstituting the
boundaries of the state despite a national platform which encourages citizens to
seize financial opportunities present in a world that is allegedly borderless. The
picture I paint of the Senegalese government strays rather dramatically from its
reputation for being one of only five democratic nations on the African continent.
Yet I hope to question the idea of “corruption” this international image
underscores by suggesting the hegemony of law in Senegal accounts for an image
that raises suspicion given what scholars have recently revealed about the
contradictory nature of the law in the African postcolony—and not only there.
Basketball, in other words, is but one order of paradox alongside other possibilities
that hitch the illicit to the licit, and national to international projects of prosperity.
But given the elaborate historical landscape I seek to chart in this chapter, it might help to start at the beginning or, at least, as close to it as possible: in this case, the past is accessible through a present event whose origins unfold the layers of Senegalese basketball history. Local narratives about basketball in Senegal pass back and forth between the Centre de Bopp and the collège St. Michel as the local origin of this sport’s introduction to the nation. These competing narratives are frequently dramatized through quotidian rituals featuring the two teams who inherited this legacy.

**Competing narratives: Centre de Bopp versus St. Michel**

The Coupe Arc-n-Ciel championship match of Spring 2003, featured the Centre de Bopp women’s senior team versus that of Jean d’Arc (based at the collège St. Michel).

Jean d’Arc dominated most of the match through superior ball-movement: they usually worked the ball into the middle, in a decidedly half-court offense, until their tallest players were open for a shot close to the basket. The Centre de Bopp team, by contrast, took more shots from the periphery. Despite this, Jean d’Arc never really held a commanding lead.

The game remained close until the final seconds, when Baby’s three-point shot with 8 seconds left lifted the Bopp team over its arch rival. The audience, poised with anticipation, exploded as soon as the whistle sounded. Some fans sneaked past security, to the court, to celebrate with their favorite players, although most confined their jubilation to the stands, where they clapped their friends on the their backs, screamed, jeered, or joined drummers in celebrating the victory with audio intensity.

As I had spent countless hours walking around the Bopp complex with trainer Ousmane Diallo, I was much closer to his squad. For that reason, I shared in their
victory. Just as I thought to locate some of my favorite players, my attention was drawn to a formal trophy ceremony commencing at center court.

Both teams lined up at the half-court line. The losing squad received its consolation prize. Then, the name of each Bopp player was called individually, as each athlete ran to join coaches and trainers standing nearby. In the culminating moment, officials presiding over the event presented the Bopp team captain with a gargantuan trophy.

Since I had attended the match with Moussa—Baby’s boyfriend’s brother—I waited around, outside, after the match to thank this newest Bopp star personally. Cheikh Omar, Baby’s boyfriend, couldn’t make the game, since he was making last-minute preparations for travel to Italy in search of work. But he felt confident he would return to Senegal before long. “I’m going to marry that girl,” he assured me.

Outside, there brewed a controlled chaos. A crowd of Bopp supporters had coalesced to take pictures with their neighborhood heroines. Suddenly, a core group of devotees snatched up the trophy, then held it aloft, as they took off down the street, chanting in unison.

“Where are they going?” I wondered, aloud.

“To the Centre de Bopp,” Moussa promptly replied.

Apparently, it was “tradition” for Bopp supporters to take the trophy directly to the Center immediately after successful tournament play. This made sense to me, as I was already quite familiar with Bopp’s legendary trophy case. When I first visited Senegal in 2002, Ousmane showed me the numerous awards and commendations its
teams had earned over the years. In fact, for much of Senegalese basketball history, Bopp contributed the bulk of talent for Senegal’s men’s and women’s national teams.

The Centre de Bopp sits in a residential area not far from the Baobab neighborhood district in Dakar. Its receives much of its funding for athletic programs from the Canadian NGO L’Union pour le Solidarité et Entrainement [Union for Solidarity and Training].

Bopp is known as much for having a local “culture of basketball” (in the words of one Senegalese professor) as it is for having produced outstanding athletes. Collective enthusiasm for the sport is evident during the course of tournament play. Bopp’s humble basketball facility amounts to two outdoor courts, immediately side-by-side. At the foot of the courts there is a concrete plateau—perhaps 10 x 50 feet—where plastic chairs are sometimes arranged, to provide seating for fans. The most committed supporters somehow find space atop the brick wall that runs along the side the court closest to the street. Others crouch in the shadow of that wall, pressed against it so as not to fall directly into the on-court action. Bopp fans are known most of all for their overweening enthusiasm. When a player suddenly dunks over an opponent, for instance, Bopp fans often spill onto the court in celebration, forcing officials to halt the game, momentarily, until they can restore order.

Perhaps even more fascinating than this club’s dominant presence in the Senegalese basketball complex is the myth of its basketball origins. The Centre de Bopp, Ousmane once revealed to me, is named after a French colonial named Monsieur Bopp, who, during the 1930s and 40s, organized recreational activities for youth of the neighborhood. Other trainers, coaches, and basketball experts agreed with this history,
but there was no documentary evidence for this claim. The Senegalese National Archives contain no reference to such a person. And, when I inquired about this mythical figure to the president of the Center she simply replied, “C’est pas sûr, dé” [In this Wolofized French: “It’s not clear to me such is the case, at all”].

I wondered, to myself, what might be the source of this idea about M. Bopp. Why is the history of Senegalese basketball shrouded in a legendary personage that invokes the legacy of French rule over the country?

It’s hard to establish a source for this narrative. And, at any rate, etymologies—whether linguistic or cultural—are seductive precisely because the “ruse of origins” has such a spellbinding power (Edwards 2001: 9). It might well be impossible to unearth the “roots” of this mythical figure. It is nevertheless crucial to note the way(s) basketball is locally understood as a practice born deep in the colonial period, one that, at the same time, coincides with the nation’s quest for independence and autonomy from France. What’s more, Senegal’s emergence as a basketball power coincides with the success of the Senegalese nation-state. These issues are important to bear in mind and to ponder alongside the various resonances the sport has assumed at present.

In that regard, it should be noted there is only one alternative story about basketball’s origins in the country in circulation among members of the Senegalese basketball complex (athletes, coaches, and trainers). The other account has it that, more than seventy years ago, French Catholic missionaries—who were part of the Communauté des Pères Spiritains⁵⁸—introduced basketball to St. Michel as part of an effort to discipline students. As a game with a designated court, needing specific types of

⁵⁸This particular detail, about the Catholic order that founded St. Michel, appears in a book published in honor of the school’s 50th anniversary in 1978 (Collège St. Michel n.d.).
equipment (a hoop), and specified instruction (about the rules for playing), basketball was preferred to football where kids—literally—played in the street.

If football is Senegalese streetball, basketball is usually restricted to schools and community centers, since basketball courts are scarce. In fact, until recently, there was only one lighted, indoor, basketball court in the entire country. Now there are two. The relative newness of basketball, and its de facto privatization, partly explain why it was picked up so enthusiastically in the decades preceding independence but also why it never became a national sport. Limited to specific schools and community centers, this sport never quite achieved the ubiquity that is crucial to sport's function as a national symbol. Still, largely because of the historical moment when it first achieved prominence, basketball soon became a key ingredient in the repertoire of imaginative possibilities.

The religious dimensions of Senegalese basketball—like the particulars of its relationship to the colonial period—are difficult to discern. There is no archival evidence to elaborate this relationship, either in the Archives Nationaux (housed in Dakar), or in the private archives of the Catholic Order (which Father Gallon oversees in the international brotherhood's Senegalese office).

For some, the Catholic conception of the sport is of little consequence for the basketball's mostly Muslim practitioners. Several parents told me that although their children attended St. Michel, they were in no danger of converting to Christianity. From their perspective the collège was, simply, a great place to go to school—and an even better place to play basketball. A brochure produced in honor of St. Michel's 50th anniversary celebration in 1988 includes the remarks of one student who indicated he was
motivated to attend the elite school because it was the collège Senegalese basketball star “Adidas” had attended.

It seems to me, though, there is another way to read this scenario other than as one in which Muslims stay faithful to their “true” religion despite receiving educational and athletic instruction at a Catholic school (in a sport intimately bound up in Christian missionary education). Rather than take the lack of concrete evidence pertaining to the sport’s Christian influence as proof of a tenuous relationship, perhaps it is useful to understand the legacy of Catholicism in Senegal as one that would be communicated in more subtle ways.

I pursue this idea in what follows alongside a discussion of Senegalese basketball since this sport’s path to prominence proceeds in tandem with—and, at times, mirrors—the formation of the Senegalese nation-state.

The Four Communes and the fetish of politics

Political organization occurred in the Senegambia region much earlier than elsewhere in Africa in part because of a rivalry between France and Britain. Though France first established links with Senegal in the late seventeenth century when it seized control of Gorée and St. Louis, commercial activity was eventually interrupted by British occupation during the French Revolution and, later, during the Napoleonic Wars. France regained its political advantage in the region, securing control of this possession from 1817 onwards.

Historians tend to emphasize the 1940s as the decade when Africans first cultivated agency in the sphere of electoral politics, citing, for instance, the United Gold Coast Convention which, under the leadership of Joseph Danqua and later, Kwame
Nkrumah, helped Ghana achieve independence in 1957. Two cities in the French colony that would later become the independent nation of Senegal, by contrast, had mayors elected to France’s national assembly by 1848. By 1879, this territory was home to a colonial assembly that provided the inhabitants of four prominent cities—Dakar, St. Louis, Gorée, and Rufisque—with many of the rights French citizens enjoyed. As one consequence of a nineteenth century policy of assimilation, France afforded French and Creole politicians living in this part of Senegambia the opportunity to control local political institutions. By 1900, electoral participation had become so widespread the colonial power was ready to reverse its decision, sensing that the increased sense of political autonomy might lead other colonies to demand the same treatment. By that time, however, some local politicians had already initiated plans to expand the sphere of opportunity beyond local elites. Blaise Diagne, in 1914, returned from the metropole where he had attended university, to become the first black African elected to French parliament in 1914 (Johnson 1971: 106-138). Re-elected several times until he finally passed in 1934, Diagne helped the originaires (the term that evolved for Africans inhabiting the Four Communes) displace the French and Creole elites who had dominated local politics until his arrival.

French policy in the region was also heavily influenced by the Revolution of 1848, in the aftermath of which the Second Republic decided to offer its Caribbean colonies and Senegal the power to send a representative to the French National Assembly. This decision led to a general election in which all originaires or habitants who had been residents in the Four Communes for at least 5 years could vote. In 1872, St. Louis and Gorée officially were officially granted, by decree, the full rights of all

The political significance of the Four Communes was demonstrated powerfully early in the twentieth century when Blaise Diagne\(^{59}\) was elected to represent these cities in the French legislature. Realizing that the colonial power desperately needed soldiers in the midst of World War I, he strategically recruited scores of Senegalese then used his ability to do so as leverage (Cooper 2002: 25) in France to strengthen his value to the Republic and in Senegal to strengthen his legitimacy and reputation as a black politician with unprecedented influence. Diagne’s recruitment project, while outfitting France for the Great War, was ultimately designed to protect the rights of his Senegalese constituents by providing permanent guarantees of French rights in exchange for military service despite “efforts by colonial administrators and French residents to disenfranchise them” (Gellar 1982: 11).

But the unique social environment of the Four Communes had additional consequences beyond the realm of electoral politics. The fact that France had held trading posts in Senegambia since the seventeenth century coupled with the pervasive presence of French colonials in living in the region to spawn a “cultural and political hybridization” with far-reaching historical ramifications, as Mamadou Diouf (1998) shows in a landmark article that theorizes this complex religious legacy, which included the “intellectual appropriation of Islam and Christianity” and which contributed to a culture characterized by its “two-sided religiosity…Catholic and Muslim, within one and the same originaires identity, whose civility [was] the product of a compromise and of

\(^{59}\) Diagne, Senegal’s first black African deputy (as opposed to the white and métis who had previously represented the colonies) held his seat from 1914 until his death in 1934.
revisions of cultural outlooks, the blending of which is a creole" (671-694, my italics).
Ultimately, because certain Islamic feasts and ritual celebrations meshed more easily with Wolof practices, and because Islam spread throughout the Senegambian region (besides, infrequently, as a result of jihad) in retaliation against French colonial incursions, the territory that became the independent nation of Senegal acquired an Islamic national identity. Nevertheless, in large measure because of the rather more cosmopolitan context in which it was cultivated, this religion’s “development and its appropriation by the originaires radically distinguishes the Islam of the Four Communes from the rural logic of the Islam of the Senegalese brotherhoods” (690). In fact, “the religious erudition of the originaires achieved a cultural hybrid[ity] which was expressed” as much “in the mastery of Arabic and of theological and judicial sciences” as it was “in the mastery of French,” thus the distinctly “colonial” quality of a Senegalese Islam which remained distinct from variants of the religion that emerged elsewhere on the African continent (692).

It is crucial to stress that the political uniqueness of the Four Communes—which also contributed to its unique religious culture—was born, in he first place, from a “Register of Grievances” male residents of St. Louis drew up in the hopes that France might abolish a powerful local corporate entity, the Compagnie du Sénégal, in order to promote greater “freedom of trade.” The unique cosmopolitan quality of Senegalese Islam, the presence of electoral politics, and the deep history of commerce in the region contributed to the idea that Senegal was ready to join European civilization and enjoy the economic benefits entailed in that transition.
The willingness to grant the *originaires* political possibilities that were aberrant in terms of France’s dealings with its African colonies grew from an impression of longstanding commitments “African Muslims” had made to the French Empire. In fact, as one colonial official remarked, “They pay the blood tax, which none of the other colonies pay, by fighting in our colonial armies” (Johnson 1991: 44). This idea that France owes its former African colonies a “blood debt” persists until the present; it continues to animate discourses of political belonging (Mann 2006). This relationship obtains in concrete terms through the many thousands of Senegalese soldiers who fought for France in the first and second World Wars, but also figuratively in the idea that French west African colonies provided the manpower—the notion they were the “blood”—of the French empire’s military operation throughout the first half of the twentieth century. After all, soldiers who owed their origins to places as distinct as Equatorial Guinea and Mali were all simply identified by their colonizers as “Senegalese” (Mann 2006).

Still, it was in part by joining the French military—and through furtive participation in electoral politics—that Senegalese actors distinguished themselves from the French perception of the continent’s colonized peoples more generally. While the cosmopolitan variant of Islam prevalent in the Four Communes was recognized as a civilized version of the Abrahamic, quotidian renditions of the religion remained mired in what a French decree of 1903 called *fétichistes* [fetishistic customs]. This could easily be dismissed as a bit of ethnocentric excess, or even as an example of the problematic but defunct discourse of racialized exploitation that characterized colonial conquest, but it is also crucial to note that entry into French civilization—though made easier by recourse to
formal politics, military service, or Islamic tutelage—required suppressing the profligate appetite for fetish customs assumed to be the nature of indigenous peoples who had not yet been redeemed by France’s *mission civilisatrice* [civilizing mission] (Diouf 2000b: 581).

Characteristic of the way Islam, as an Abrahamic faith somewhat tied to the biblical legacy of Christianity, was imagined to sever African actors from utter barbarism, Senegalese Muslims eventually earned the respect of French colonial officials. This was especially true of the Murids, which had funded Blaise Diagne’s political campaigns. By the latter part of the nineteenth century, French colonial authorities had delegated production of the territory’s primary crop—groundnuts—to members of that Islamic brotherhood, believing religious hierarchies constituted an efficient way to manage the crop. Subsequently, Senegal became the wealthiest colony in French West Africa—members of this group enjoyed most of the spoils.

Between 1919 and 1939, however, production faltered primarily because of a decline in prices for the crop. And when the Vichy regime seized power in France in 1940, it “abolished Senegal’s representative assemblies, outlawed trade unions, and denied Senegal’s African citizens the prerogatives and rights of French citizenship” (Gellar 1982: 17). Besides taking these measures, African labor became more exhausting and taxes more severe. As such, political power and economic standing diminished severely to a point not ameliorated until the end of World War II.

As France started to sense victory in the Second World War, General Charles de Gaulle organized the Brazzaville Conference to discuss the future of France’s colonies south of the Sahara, during the latter months of 1944. Integral to the proceedings were
Senegalese politicians like Lamine Gueye, who assumed Blaise Diagne’s former seat and pushed for reforms that included: 1) eliminating the distinction between citizens and subjects in the colonies, 2) extending full rights of citizenship to all Africans, 3) abolishing forced labor in the colonies, and 4) creating a fund that would subsidize efforts to develop Senegal (Gellar 1982: 17).

Leopold Sedar Senghor, future first President of Senegal (and protégé of Gueye) became the most influential local politician of the late 1940s, collaborating with Mamadou Dia of what was formerly the French Sudan in a party that eventually became known as the Union Progressiste Sénégalais (UPS). When, in the aftermath of the French-Algerian liberation struggle, France offered its African colonies the option of being 1) fully emancipated, 2) part of the Republic, or 3) autonomous as a self-governing republic with a network of Commonwealth States, Sénégal opted for the third option, creating the Mali Federation with neighboring French Sudan. Born on April 4, 1960, the coalition gradually fell apart and fully imploded on August 22, 1960, when Senegalese authorities arrested Malian leader Modibo Keita and sent him back to Bamako.

As Senegal affirmed its autonomy, it embarked upon a path that allowed it to thrive in the realm of athletic contest. This is especially true of basketball’s introduction to the country. The story of this sport, when set against the birth of the Senegalese nation, illuminates a special relationship between a shifting political agenda in early twentieth century Senegal and a new sport through which some of its aspirations would be articulated.
Tip-Off: The promise of independence

It is difficult to pin down the exact history of basketball in Africa, though it seems to have entered the continent through Egypt in the early 1900s through activity of Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) missionaries from the United States (Diouf 2001).

Basketball had of course been invented by the Scottish-Canadian, Calvinist, Presbyterian Minister James Naismith. He created the sport at a YMCA training camp for missionaries in Springfield, Massachusetts in 1891. Interested in developing a winter sport for camp participants, Naismith wanted to create something very different from football and rugby, which he considered to be wild and unruly. Basketball was Naismith's version of a recreational activity designed “to bring some order” to the “incorrigible” youth over which he administrated. As they had thus far proved “unmanageable,” he set out to design a game that would “tame the savage” students (Wolff 1991: 8).

As the game was first taught to missionaries, it was soon exported overseas and seems to have landed in Egypt around the end of World War I. Interestingly, basketball soon broke with its strictly religious tutelage, in this locale at least, as “European missionaries, soldiers, and clerks” were the ones responsible for institutionalizing the sport by creating the first club teams in the 1920s (Diouf 2001: 4). The sport was introduced to other African countries in the same moment, as it seems to have landed in

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60 In examining different sporting practices, one can see the ideologies that distinguish them from each other (Bourdieu 1990: 157-158). For instance, in many contexts, privileged sports are those that have minimal bodily contact and focus instead on strategy, thus preserving a division of mental over manual work that corresponds to labor practices (Bourdieu 1984: 214, 217-218). These factors were certainly part of Naismith’s program, however inadvertently.
Côte d’Ivoire in 1921. As I’ve mentioned, the sport is alleged to have made its way to St. Michel by 1929.

Interest in basketball was most pronounced in its African birthplace as Egypt produced athletes talented enough to compete in the Berlin Olympic games of 1936 (Diouf 2001): the first year basketball was even included in the festivities.

The history of basketball in Africa (and as we will see in Senegal, more specifically) conforms to Frederick Cooper’s (2002: xi) insight: “In many ways, the time of World War II (really the late 1930s through the late 1940s) is crucial for understanding what is at stake in the African postcolony. As he shows, “In the 1940s and 1950s...access to officially recognized economic channels, both inside and outside, seemed to be opening wider to Africans” (5).

Further, external events informed the way domestic issues unfolded as the impact of basketball on the African continent coincided with the birth of Senegal as an independent nation-state:

“L’idée de créer une confédération africaine de basket est lancée au Congrès de la Fédération Internationale (FIBA) tenu en Août 1960 en marge des Jeux Olympiques de Rome...[Dans ce moment.] [I]l a plupart des pays d’Afrique venaient d’accéder à la souveraineté internationale."

“The idea to create an African basketball confederation was launched in the International Federation of Basketball...[was] held in August in 1960 in the Rome Olympic Games...[At a time when] [m]ost African countries had just achieved international sovereignty” (Diouf 2001).

The Associations des Fédérations Africaines de Basket-ball (AFABA) boasted eleven original members: Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guinée, Burkina Faso (then Upper Volta), Libya, Mali, Morocco, and Zimbabwe (then North Rhodesia), Sierra Leone, Sudan, and Togo. As the organization’s main aim was to organize, spread, and encourage

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(d’organiser, de propager, et d’encourager) basketball throughout the continent, it selected Cairo as the seat of its first Presidency. At the same time, however, Senegal steadily improved its local participation in—and international image with respect to—the sport. Of the first six presidents of the AFABA, two were Senegalese.⁶¹

When Senegal formed a joint team with Morocco to compete in the 1968 Olympics, the nation officially distinguished itself as home to some of Africa’s premier talent in the sport. In fact, besides Egypt and Angola, Senegal is the only country whose national men’s team has won the African Nations Cup in basketball five times (’68, ’72, ’78, ’80, and ’97).

There is a striking resonance between these initial years of success and Senegal’s postcolonial agricultural crisis. In the years immediately preceding independence, Senegal was one of the world’s leading peanut producers. But a series of droughts in subsequent years (in ’68, ’70, ’72, and ’73) destroyed the profit-earning potential of Senegal’s best soil (Diop n.d., Youm 1991). As the farming industry collapsed, scores of people headed to the capital city of Dakar and other urban areas in search of work. Men made this trip far more frequently than women, who were expected to remain in rural areas so they could uphold domestic responsibilities (Diouf 1996: 230). This trend continues through the present. Thus, Senegal’s unemployed youth population is still overwhelmingly male. These developments set in motion processes that produced youth as the most significant social category in postcolonial Africa although this demographic, more than age, is defined my the social liminality of its members. For that reason, youth are central to popular discourses about the fate of Senegal—and Africa more generally—

⁶¹ More recently, as a FIBA-AFRICA publication from 2001 makes clear, Abdoulaye Seye (who is Senegalese) was named President of the Fédération International de Basketball (FIBA).
because they are simultaneously feared and revered for the power they possess to transform African societies, for better or for worse; as desperation breeds desperados, it is more often the latter. And while youth are demonized, more often than not, public sympathy engulfs conversations about the *talibés*, young children alleged to be under the parental guidance and tutelage of Islamic marabouts who, more frequently, roam the streets in tattered clothes, begging for handouts. This practice grows out of the belief, consistent with Senegalese Sufi Islam, that it is divine to solicit *gifts* in the name of Allah. In this specific example, though, the public discourse tends toward the impression that the Supreme Being has forsaken these street children.

And yet, the postcolonial malaise that characterizes public discourse in Senegal contradicts the widespread perception that this nation is “one of Africa’s model democracies,”[62] allegedly one of only five African countries not run by dictatorships (Taylor 2005). The government’s political legitimacy—to the chagrin of these laudatory reports—is frequently called into question locally.

One important consequence of the mechanism of authority that obtained in the Four Communes was that they served as a constant reminder of the unique political status the country had been granted, which remains — in the background of popular perceptions governing Senegalese politics to this day. This is in part what some journalists mean when they suggest, “For the Senegalese, political participation and peaceful leadership

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are nothing new.\textsuperscript{63} "Leadership," though, can certainly be "peaceful" and problematic at one and the same time.

"Poet and statesman" Leopold Sedar Senghor, who led the country to independence, steered the course of a nation that went more than ten years without holding competitive elections as, for much of his presidency, there was only one legal political party. Though Senegal officially achieved independence in 1960, it was 1976 before Senghor passed legislation permitting the presence of three political parties—one Marxist-Leninist, one Democratic Socialist, and one Liberal—which, he argued, represented the dominant political inclinations of Senegalese people (Fatton 1987).

In other words, Senghor's is a tortured legacy. If, as Nigerian writer and Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka (2002: 2) contends, the "lesson in power" Senegal's first president demonstrated is "the transcendence of the humanist over the trappings of the office, a lesson that one wished so desperately other African Heads of State would heed," he is known as much for "the misappropriation of funds" as for instituting a Civil Code that protected individual rights (Diagne 2002: 13). The same man who defended the political and cultural integrity of the Senegalese nation is also known for agricultural collapse and industrial ruin (Ibid.).

And when Senghor finally left office in 1981, he did so in a non-election year so that, constitutionally, the presidency was transferred to his Prime Minister and understudy, Abdou Diouf. Scholars usually consider this to be a voluntary abdication of power; yet, from another perspective, one could contend that, for the first twenty years of independence, Senegal was ruled by Senghor's party and the political course he had set

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\textsuperscript{63} Ibid.

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(Fatton 1987). Subsequently, despite pioneering changes in the national constitution in order to institute free and fair elections, Diouf simultaneously faced accusations of vote-tampering and electoral fraud (Diouf 1996).

Though Diouf served as the Senegalese Head of State for nearly two decades after Senghor’s departure in 1981, the Parti Socialiste’s dominance was officially shattered when long-time opposition leader Abdoulaye Wade became president in 2000. But Wade’s politics have been suspicious for other reasons. A presidential candidate as far back as 1993, he was implicated in the assassination of a constitutional court judge many people believe he masterminded, although he blamed that year’s victor for the crime.

These events are, perhaps, surprising only because they took place in one of Africa’s most “democratic” countries. Elsewhere in Africa, of course, the idea of democracy is challenged far more frequently. Yet it’s a true testament to Senghor’s political genius that he maintains a pristine image, even among activist-minded intellectuals like Soyinka who have crusaded against the sinister side of postcoloniality in their own homelands.

For instance, while the Nigerian government has, on several occasions, accused Wole Soyinka of treason for failing to condemn violent acts of rebellion against the state, Soyinka implied such a politics was justified since it was directed at a “corrupt” and illegitimate government anyway (1997).

Treason accusations always entail a claim by one side that the other has violated well-recognized democratic standards (Pietz 1997)—the national constitution, for instance, or due process. That this kind of discourse is to be expected should not prevent analysts from understanding just how uncritical it can be. After all, what makes Nigeria so dangerous as an example of a former nation-state whose nation and state now exist in
an uneasy and hostile relationship to each other (cf. Trouillot 1990) has at least as much to do with the way domestic policy is shaped by the interests of transnational oil conglomerates that wreak environmental devastation (Apter 2005, Smith 2005)—and which have been implicated in the assassinations of student protestors against them (British Broadcast News)—as it does with the transgression of juridical standards (Pietz 1997).

This all suggests that while Soyinka—and various others (Smith 2001, Chabal and Daloz 1999; Bayart, Ellis, and Hibou 1999; Gupta 1995; Bayart 1993; Achebe 1983)—are correct to suggest that many African governments are, in some sense, “corrupt” (Soyinka 1996) or “fraudulent” (Soyinka in Masiki 2006), such designations do as much to obscure the problem as to illuminate the political intricacies of scenarios such as these. For, to suggest that Nigerian democracy is simply illegitimate is to imply that the political instruments in question are pristine, that if a few culprits can be dethroned or, perhaps, imprisoned, the problem would be solved. But what if—as the foregoing analysis suggests—the concept of political legitimacy is rather more complex? What if, indeed, there is an intimate relationship between law and lawlessness in the African postcolony, and not only there (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006)? What implications might that have for political theory?

Soyinka himself has, admittedly, resorted to extra-legal violence as a means to convey his political position, “In 1965, he took over a radio station in Ibadan at gunpoint and persuaded the engineers to play a tape denouncing the fraudulent federal election results that the government planned to air” (Masiki 2006: 41). That he was subsequently imprisoned for three months but later acquitted—as much as the fact that two years later
he was jailed on spurious charges—indicates that the idea of “corruption” in Nigeria is, at best, an imprecise and unstable signifier.

These issues are crucial to consider in the Senegalese context, where democracy is upheld as crucial to the national political project but is simultaneously undermined. For instance, in contrast to countries like Ethiopia and Cameroon, long criticized for imprisoning journalists, Senegalese government officials promote free press (they even permit the easy circulation of international press) while sanctioning harsh criticism by charging dissenting media with libel.

In other words, Senghor’s efforts to sustain the “authority of the secular State” (Diagne 2002) culminated in a tradition of “authoritarian democracy” Wade has extended (Fatton 1987). Even so, the Senegalese state is considered to possess a democracy quite “rare” on “a continent plagued by coups, conflict and election frauds” as a result, most likely, of its typical position of non-alignment, active anti-terrorist initiatives, and eagerness to embrace international investment projects recommended by foreign experts. This last issue is the most significant and explains why popular media avenues insist that, “Although poverty is widespread and unemployment is [at a record] high, the country’ has one of the world’s more stable economies.”

What might economic stability mean under these conditions, except officially endorsing a particular set of economic prescriptions—an aggressive project of economic liberalization—that has as yet yielded few, if any dividends.

The gains to be expected from such an agenda, however, exceed those derived from trade, as one example from a different context reveals.

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The Economist’s April 29, 2006 issue featured an article entitled, “Eritrea: A myth of self-reliance,” which chastised President Isaias Aferworki for clinging to a “mantra of self-reliance” while “food aid is rotting in warehouses”; this, regrettably, in a nation full of people who are “tired and hungry.” Despite recent increases in crop yields, these experts insisted, Eritrea was simply incapable of meeting the needs of its national population. Yet, the government was “deliberately rejecting help” (2006: 52). The Economist typically popularizes views of Africa that accord with neoclassical economic perspectives. Still, in configuring neoliberal inclinations as the commonsense input of experts, journalistic accounts like this one capture widely shared ideas about the source of economic failure in African postcolonies.

The article in question scoffed at Eritrea’s complaint the UN had done little to enforce the border delineation it approved a few years prior with Ethiopia (its former colonizer), and dismissed the idea that its “latest order to the three large agencies [who were reported] to stop their work could somehow improve efficiency and maximize the impact of aid.” According to the Economist, such a policy is one reason “analysts question the government’s competence.” The unidentifed writer of this article stressed that the agencies in question, “the American Mercy Corps, the Irish charity Concern, and Acord, a British group—have done some of the best work in Eritrea.” In closing, the piece suggests Eritrea was, more than anything else, trying to hide its food shortage—what amounts to a “humanitarian disaster”—under the cloak of autonomy and concludes, sarcastically, by feigning a conceit that perhaps if indeed “Africa’s youngest country cannot achieve self-reliance in practice,” it is justified in trying to “create the illusion of it” (Ibid.).

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Most interesting about this article is the way that, even apart from the strengths or limitations of Eritrea’s political prescriptions, the writer overlooks legitimate concerns about the relationship between U.S. and British geopolitical interests for a focus on what the reader is led to believe is the most pressing issue: the fate of the Eritrean people. Yet this discourse, like many of those that permeate discussions of African political economy, suggests immediate economic concerns (i.e. managing resources, like food) trump political concerns, although the economic options suggested have everything to do with efforts by more powerful nations (like the U.S. and Britain) to sustain and advance their own geopolitical interests, even if unintentionally, or surreptitiously, through the work of aid organizations. Again Senegal, by contrast, seems not much concerned with “self-reliance” at all, which seems to be why—from a certain vantage—it is presented as a “model” for other African countries to follow. One key factor in a country’s democratic evaluation seems to be the extent to which it desires something like “self-reliance,” not whether or not such an enterprise is successful: the true crime seems to be seeking it in the first place.

Senegal is rather explicit in its agenda of, first, encouraging overseas commerce in a country where, by now, remittances sent home from overseas constitute one of the largest family incomes (Buggenhagen 2003, Diouf 2003). Part of this project includes seeking foreign direct assistance and austerity packages (Youm 1995). Like those Senegal first began to pursue in the mid-70: the ones that created the youth crisis in employment that constitutes the nation’s most urgent social problem and which, fascinatingly, provides the pool of potential athletes who have become increasingly mobile, in recent decades, using sports as a strategy of migration.
But locally, as economic stagnation only intensified with failed attempts at structural adjustment, many young men—faced with decades of chronic unemployment—remain idle. Some choose crime as a means of economic advancement. Others exhaust their free time in recreational sport. Government officials and NGOs advocate this enterprise, hoping it can help young people strengthen their resolve to avoid drugs, crime, and sex. According to Nicolas Yakana Bissegue, the technical director for the NGO *Enda Tiers-Monde*’s sports academy:

> Although sports are seen as just another youth activity for working-class teenagers, it is also an excellent vehicle through which to fight ills such as juvenile delinquency, drugs, and prostitution in Dakar’s poorest suburbs (2002:1)

The programs Bissegue organizes do not simply “train young people in sports,” either, they provide education about sexually transmitted diseases,” too, in the quest to promote “a healthy mind and a healthy body” for each young person in Senegal (Ibid). And the initiative seems to have effected powerful results for at least one young person who, as a former “sex worker” was “converted to football” through the *Enda Aacademy* (2). The phrasing here, even more than a message of moral uplift tends toward a quest for salvation.

The initiative to promote sports as an alternative to moral decay—and its institutionalization in schools, community centers, and NGO facilities—has seemingly paid off, as Senegal dominated sub-Saharan Africa in basketball during the early part of the twentieth century.

This is so much the case that, the relative absence of men’s championships in basketball over the past decade has provoked anxiety in the athletic world. One trainer, alarmed by this development suggested that, as officanados of local basketball they
needed to “Croire en notre basket” [“Believe in our basketball”...“Believe in Senegalese basketball”]. Yet those concerned seemed to overlook the high rate of success among women. In a country, that is second only to Canada for the number of NCAA basketball players it has produced—in the nation that has landed five men in the NBA—the male subject alone is regarded as the proper vehicle for athletic aspirations, for local definitions of economic success, by these means.

But even more remarkable than the national men’s team’s five championships, the women’s team has won the continent’s top honor twice as often. At the same time, despite outperforming the men, the women’s team is not nearly as popular. Victory by the men’s team is usually greeted by a lot fanfare, the women’s successes usually pass unnoticed.

**Exceptional players**

Of the six women’s championships held in Africa between 1974 and 1984 ('74, '77, '79, 81, '84), Senegal took home the trophy five times. They would win five more titles by 2000 ('90, '92, '97, '99, '00).

Abdou Diouf, who was President at the time, chose the team’s eighth championship as the occasion to provide an especially elaborate celebration.\(^{65}\) Resurrecting a Wolof adage—*Ku def lu rey, am lu rey*—meaning the winners deserved a reward equal to the value of their achievements, Diouf hosted a reception for the team where he announced

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\(^{65}\) The President also had a niece who, at one point, played for the national squad—this certainly increased his affection for the lionesses.
he would award each team member with her own lodging: “Une maison à chaque
‘Lionne,’” *Le Soleil* announced.66

This was in the midst of a postcolonial employment crisis, by now, several decades
in the making. Of course, real estate was something of a different matter altogether, and
the state certainly had the means to access these properties. But what is the implication
that the women’s team might be rewarded this way for outstanding performance in the
sphere of athletic competition even as the country struggled financially? This was so
much the case that only four years before, in 1994, Senegal had de-valued its currency
(the franc CFA) in the hopes of bolstering its failed economy. But in this moment, social
problems were tabled to celebrate the team that had so honored the nation. This was a
victory that, besides earning the devoted following of the nation, had proven the lionesses
were dreaming of—and ready to take on—the world, as captured in a headline from *Le
Soleil* capturing that exact sentiment: “Les Lionnes Rêvent du Monde” [The Lionesses
dream of (exploring) the World].67

Yet even as an honor designed to applaud the women’s team’s important success,
this gift concretized an already problematic aspect of Senegalese basketball in the same
moment that male players became intensely committed to developing their talents in
basketball as a strategy for migration. The Senegalese president, however unwittingly,
outfitted the women’s players with the proper accoutrements to excel at domesticity.
Even as the male players, who had far less success beating their colleagues elsewhere in
the continent, were clamoring to join European or Asian club teams, NCAA squads, and

66 *Le Soleil*, “Une maison à chaque ‘Lionne’: Le chef de l’Etat récompense les championnes

67 “Maintenant les ‘Lionnes’ rêvent du Monde [Now, the Lionesses dream of the World],”
NBA rosters, Senegalese women—many of whom found it difficult in that moment to find partners worthy of marriage, who could afford to purchase the homes married couples ideally construct for themselves—were being given a hand by the government, although it was one that pulled on the back of their jerseys.

If indeed the “gift” is about reconfiguring personal networks (Mauss 1966)—about using objects to solidify bonds of intimacy (Derrida 1992)—the Senegalese government effectively communicated a message of restraint, restricting Senegalese women to a pivot, within the domestic sphere. Meanwhile their male colleagues were developing alternate strategies for coping with crisis.

Senegal’s escalating rates of youth unemployment constitute a problem that, according to Momar-Coumba Diop, “continues to show itself and will be a large-scale constraint for current and future leaders” (Harsch 2001, Wade n.d., Diouf 1996). To stress the point, he provides a description of what life under such conditions means for youth:

For young people [in Senegal], the key word is “getting by”, [sic] that is to say all the activities of survival, the small jobs that characterize the urban landscape, where an impressive number of people can be seen working in the street.

But, “[w]hat does getting by mean for these young people?” The eminent Senegalese historian insists it requires:

trying to find a place in the casual sector, getting into the contracted work force, accepting the tough laws of apprenticeship, but also “getting out” at any price, that is to say taking the option of international migration... 68

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Senegalese labor circuits extend in several directions at once—from Turin to Tokyo, Madrid to Rio de Janeiro—but the privileged destination, among Senegalese youth seems to be New York City.

“New York Sans Visa”

During one interview I conducted with Director Sow, who leads a prominent sports facility, he communicated—in language that is very telling—what he considered to be the true goal of the institution he leads:

“Here we strive to help youth develop their abilities through sport. We have built something to help young people create a vision for themselves. To help them receive the best possible education, with or without sport.”

“At the Center,” Director Sow told me, “our goal is to help youth become well-educated with or without basketball. Even if you don’t go to the NBA,” he assured me, “you can earn a diploma. You can become a basketball trainer, a physical education instructor, someone who values education and appreciates the honor associated with these vocations. Plans to escape the country in order to turn pro, after all, had historical, geographical, cultural, and educational repercussions. Sometimes it is better for youth to stay at home and learn something. Emigration is a problem [because] young people are the national treasure.”

“[And besides that,] not everyone can make it to the NBA…Young people are our angels. We need to place them in a position whereby they can contribute to the development of the country.”

The idea that young people are “angels” set aloft to soar beyond the nation-state in search of capital they can siphon back into the Senegalese economy overlaps with what has been a path of increased economic liberalization since Abdou Diouf assumed the
Presidency in 1981 (Diouf 1996, Fatton 1987, Buggenhagen 2003), but emerges often in
initiatives that don’t even necessarily involve the Senegalese government, like the
program conceived last year whereby the U.S. State Department granted the University of
Delaware $326,000 “to allow university faculty, coaches and players to teach basketball
skills to youths in Senegal” (Thomas 2005). The project also included participation from
one new Senegalese basketball academy, the Senegalese Basketball Federation and—
appropriately enough—the NBA’s “Basketball Without Borders” program.

Thus more than indexing an idea picked up by specific enterprises like this one,
Sow’s message, while seeming rather simple and straightforward, codes a number of
relationships that are rather specific to the current historical moment.

Put another way, while the Director explicitly states that “[n]ot everyone can
make it to the NBA,” he reveals a keen awareness of professional basketball in the U.S.
as a primary destination for migratory aspiration, and basketball as a sport preferred for
that particular kind of enterprise.

For many of Senegal’s basketball pioneers, by contrast, the path was rather
serendipitous. “Adidas,” for instance, confessed to me he had no idea what he wanted to
with his life when he graduated from lycée more than three decades ago. But, as he had
always been a basketball stand-out, he borrowed money from family members for a trip
to France where he tried out for and made a club team.

Billy Niagne, a former professional basketball player in France—also
Senegalese—had a similar story. Niagne now operates a summer basketball camp at the
Centre de Bopp in Senegal for black basketball players from France with ancestry linking
them to different parts Africa. Niagne, too, graduated from lycée. As such, he went
straight into the military. But without employment at the end of his service, he headed to France, where he played professional basketball and became a star.

Niagne elaborated his appreciation for basketball since it had been more than an opportunity for employment. In his eyes, basketball was his “passport to education.” He explained that he first became interested in basketball after NBA legend Kareem Abdul-Jabbar visited the African continent. In seeing an African American who was also a Muslim—like Billy himself—the future French all-star began to believe his athletic talent might also afford him the opportunity to travel and experience the world.

What’s more, Billy’s was more than a vision that celebrated the material benefits of cosmopolitanism. He believed traveling throughout Europe and the United States had prepared him to understand the plight of “black” people—in his words, too, “African” people—everywhere, hence his commitment to creating a program that served young basketball players of African descent:

People think black Americans are rich. But by traveling, I’ve learned that black people are usually poor. Even in the U.S., the majority of black Americans are poor and not rich. That’s why I want these young people to develop their minds. So, they won’t believe everything they hear on the news. Basketball can be their way to do that.

Basketball, in this case, ignited the aspirations of a Senegalese basketball player-turned-coach who used his opportunity to play abroad as a way to receive an “education” (in social stratification, diaspora, and institutional racism), one he tries desperately to impart on a generation of ballplayers who aren’t guaranteed to enjoy the same successes.

My own efforts to understand the infrastructure of religion, race, commerce, and education that sustains the Senegalese vector of a global basketball circuit draws me back, repeatedly, to my first day at the college St. Michel when I noticed that, affixed to
the same wall that displayed Goudiaby’s basketeurs, was a flier for a local party. What most intrigued me about the advertisement was that it boasted what was most likely an unauthorized picture of the Brooklyn-native, rapper Jay-Z. The flier’s message: “New York Sans Visa.”

Brooklyn showed up elsewhere during my ethnographic inquiry. On the same wall that displayed the hopes [espoirs] of Senegalese peoples momentarily imprisoned during President George W. Bush’s 2003 visit was scrawled the phrase, “Brooklyn Zoo”—the title of U.S. rapper Ol’ Dirty Bastard’s 1995 hit single.

Then, again, while conducting interviews with the S.E.E.D. basketball team, based in Thiès, Senegal, I met a former captain of the Bopp senior men’s team who is known locally simply as “Brooklyn.” He told me people called him “Brooklyn” because he has an “American” style of play: a style steeped more in playground genres of improvisation than goal-directed performance structured by some commitment to the fundamentals. In embracing New York as the ideological ground for solidifying a bond with a population located elsewhere with whom he believed he shared an affinity, Brooklyn drew from the beyond the circulation of U.S. practices and products in transnational spaces to construct a form of racial identity that articulates through commodified practices and products: a form of diasporic globalization, in other words, sustained by an Atlantic circuit of exchange (chapter 5).

It’s important to note that France has operated historically as the key destination for basketball players headed to professional leagues overseas, as the examples of Adidas and Billy Niagne reveal.
The transnational movement of Senegalese basketball players has changed in recent years, however. Instead of joining professional teams immediately after high school, it is now more frequently the case that players decide—at an earlier moment—whether they believe they can get themselves “college-ready.” If so, they head to the U.S., where they can play for a college or university in the hopes of earning a professional contract soon afterwards. Otherwise, they might play professionally, immediately, for a team in Europe or elsewhere.

In this sense, Brooklyn carried his moniker, perhaps, as a harbinger of his future destination. But there was even more to the story.

My first effort to interview Brooklyn was quite difficult because he has a pronounced stammering problem. It took him something like 8 seconds to squeeze out his first word during our conversation. In fact, I was saddened by his linguistic trials because it seemed cruel to make him speak when it seemed like such a chore. Suddenly, he switched out of French—the language we had been using—and asked, “Do you mind if I speak English?”

“No,” I replied, though I was curious about why he would rather speak English than French (the language he assumed I spoke best besides Wolof, and Senegal’s official language) or Wolof (the country’s unofficial lingua franca).

To my surprise, he didn’t stutter at all, when speaking English. His first few words slipped out hesitantly but, by the time he completed his first sentence, he was conversing easily. Effortlessly.

I asked how he managed to speak English so well. He couldn’t really explain it, except to say he had always had a problem with stuttering in French. English, a language
he had learned from television and by devoting himself to his studies, was painless and enjoyable by comparison.

In trying to understand the anthropological significance of a struggle to articulate one’s aspirations in French, I am struck by Sigmund Freud’s most curious notion that stammering represents the effort to overcome what, at an earlier moment, was a conflict surrounding excremental functions. Speech pathologists, more frequently, consider this behavior to be the consequence of childhood stress that disinclines children to talk. But I suspect there is a precious insight in the work of Freud that needs to be seized, if only metonymically. In the same way that he understood stuttering to be symptomatic of a child’s wish to defecate on his parents, I view the stuttering of this Senegalese basketball player as a tactic for similarly disabusing himself of the authority symbolized by the legacy of colonial rule. As a captain of the Bopp senior team, this legacy is familiar to him but is seemingly displaced by a passion for playing professionally in the United States. When asked why he preferred this transatlantic destination, he simply replied that it was the “best” place for basketball.

And yet beyond the obvious fact that NBA teams have what economists might call a “competitive advantage” over teams in leagues in other countries, I am less interested in this specific economic hierarchy than in the strategies Senegalese athletes use to rehearse certain career possibilities and to position themselves for new enterprises many of which, it seems, foreground practices and products emanating from the U.S.

“Les americains”: The diasporic reversal

When preparing for competition with other African basketball teams in the late 1990s, local press continuously warned that it would be difficult for the Senegalese national
men’s team to piece its squad together without the conspicuous presence of “Les
Americains.” In this moment, the reporter captured a broader public sentiment that,
despite the large numbers of Senegalese basketball players that have moved into Europe,
Asia, North Africa, and even Latin America (especially during the past few decades), the
most valuable players hailed from one country in particular.

For Senegalese men who aspire to the ranks of greatness, this situation is
complicated by their tendency to promote the idea that African Americans are blessed
with unique physical gifts that make them especially well-suited for the sport. But what
does it mean that Senegalese players emulate African American athletes who ultimately
owe their success to Africa? I am not interested in seeking to undo—or even in trying to
challenge—this claim. Rather, it seems important to acknowledge the ideas involving
descent, nation, race, gender, and mobility that structure these transatlantic athletic
circuits, especially with regard to the way indices of Africa come (back) to the continent
bearing both its imprint and its permutation, from the standpoint of those who receive the
revised product or practice.

As hip hop functions, in Senegal, as basketball’s soundtrack, it is perhaps no
surprise that it furnishes lyrical evidence for the way youth negotiate this same idea
locally. One of Senegal’s most celebrated rap groups (one that has increasingly garnered
attention on the world stage) is Daara J. The group’s 2004 album was called Boomerang.
The title is a metaphor for the history of hip hop music. According to group members,
the art form was conceived on the African continent—as evident in the various

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69 While drummers and other musicians more closely linked to indigenous models of ritual
entertainment provide the music for Senegalese football matches (for example, the national football team’s
anthem is an mbalax song), basketball teams use hip hop DJs for their tournaments and local
competitions.
Senegalese spoken word traditions it resembles—then was transported to the Americas during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, where it reached its modern-day incarnation on the streets of New York. Now, as far as they are concerned, rap has come of age and is ready to reconnect with its roots.

In thinking through the reasons Senegalese artists might credit the U.S. with being central to the art form that constitutes their career pursuit, one must not only consider that it is the place where hip hop has flourished, but the fact that the same city in which hip hop was born is also now the city with perhaps the largest concentration of Senegalese migrants. The Senegalese diaspora in New York is so large, in fact, that a section of Harlem’s famous 125th street marketplace, “Le Petit Sénégal” was the subject of a recent documentary.

The U.S. is significant for other reasons as well, as Senegal created and then led the African coalition against terrorism in the tragic aftermath of the September 11th attack on the World Trade Center (chapter 3).

Remarkable to me, first of all, is just how much the story of a “boomerang” that left its origins, suffered hard knocks, then finally made it back home sounds like an adult describing the path of a disorderly “youth” who strayed during a troubled adolescence until s/he finally reconnects with lessons instilled in the child since birth.70 Even more to the point, this narrative is deployed to anchor a relationship between Africa and its diaspora that, instead or privileging “origins” grants a privileged place to products (hip hop/rap) ad practices (basketball) birthed in the diaspora by players marked with an African genius. That only young men are imagined to have conceived both forms (as

70 Use of the masculine pronoun here deliberate since, as mentioned above, the concept of “youth is usually gendered in this way.
much as the material fact of gender hierarchies and chauvinist customs in both the U.S. and Senegal) speaks to the lapses in information and accuracy that structure this idea. Despite working with impartial information—and through powerful distortions—these young people create ideas designed to transform their economic positions, radically, and improve their life chances, dramatically.

Something about the idea of diasporic culture as a “boomerang” already in the midst of its return helps explain how the young Senegalese basketball prodigy Brooklyn can love rap music but elevate Nas as his favorite rapper, although the artist is actually from Queens. As misrecognition is a key feature of many diasporic discourses (Warren 2000), this perhaps is not surprising. Still, my point is not to expose inconsistencies in Brooklyn’s understanding of U.S. pop culture but rather to emphasize that (mis)recognition, or the tendency toward inconsistent and errant notions of one’s identity with others, is a part of sociality (Edwards 2001), a tension that becomes attenuated—perhaps even exaggerated—when stretched taut by national and class divisions, but one present in all efforts to (re)produce collectives. In the Senegalese case it seems, in the wake of economic crisis, diaspora has become especially valuable—more than ever in the past decade—as a symbolic and economic resource (Hintzen 2005), and commodified forms like basketball provide the occasion for solidifying these imagined links.

For, although Senegalese athletes can—and do—brag that the sport has been around for decades, it has not always been as popular as it now seems to be. Nor has there been the concerted effort to erect hoops and purchase paraphernalia in the way that consumes many Senegalese adolescents at present. For as much as it is popular locally, basketball is also a fairly reliable index of cosmopolitanism. The young people who
often own the most authentic basketball athletic wear are usually the same young people who travel to cities like New York and Chicago during summer vacations. Otherwise, they are the people who have relatives laboring in these locales who send clothes, shoes, wristbands, and NBA DVDs home with remittances.

But, as I mentioned, the recent history of basketball is often obliterated in favor of a narrative that places it deep in the Senegalese past. This point was driven home during an interview with Silman Dial, a Senegalese point guard now playing for a Christian college in Oklahoma. When I asked him how he became involved in basketball, he mentioned that he was from Gorée, a place “where basketball has always been really popular.” Yet, I happen to know the first basketball team on Gorée Island was formed by Anderson Thompson, an African American professor who spent a great deal of time in Senegal during the eighties and was dismayed by the large numbers of young men with an interest in the sport who did not have the opportunity to play. The team Thompson created and outfitted with sneakers donated by military servicemen and Peace Corps volunteers was actually the first team the island ever had.

This is why I consider basketball to represent a particular form of youth historicity. In the training they receive not usually from any explicitly state-sponsored arena but, instead, from the different private schools, NGOs, and community centers operating in the Senegalese postcolony, youth assert the legitimacy of their interests in it, even as they develop a form of counter-memory with which to challenge the way football looms large in the national government’s political imagination. This should not be altogether surprising. Sport is one way collectivities measure breaks in historical consciousness. Baseball, in Cuba’s postcolonial period, emerged as an activity through
which the island nation distinguished itself from the propensity for bullfighting that had characterized life under Spanish rule. This example demonstrates one of the central paradoxes that inheres in these examples of a historicity grounded in appreciation for a particular sport: it often becomes delinked from the sport of origin and acquires a new sentiment. Though baseball had been introduced to Cuba by American troops stationed there during the 1860s (Klein 1991:16), it was the sport’s presence in the country at a time when subjects were building a new sense of Cubanidad that enabled it to be indigenized as a national symbol. Likewise, basketball’s resurgence as the sport of choice among youth cannot be delinked from the fact of Senegal’s close ties to the United States at the level of geopolitics. Yet, it can neither be reducible to that. For, in developing an Atlantic imaginary around the sport of basketball, Senegalese youth are building their own transnational circuits and harnessing the power to rebut the concept of the political being forged by Abdoulaye Wade and propensity for capitalizing on the national football team’s international performances.

But while a single sport came to occupy the Cuban national imaginary, in this instance, both football and basketball are tremendously popular, though their constituencies are divided along a politically charged generational cleavage. Thus while football solidifies international circuits between Senegal, and its African neighbors—shoring up well-worn migratory circuits with Europe—basketball harkens to new linkages between Senegal and the United States.

This alternate alliance is made explicit in various ways. While traditional Senegalese drums are often used to inspire football success, as the drummer Pape Sene once explained, “A player like El Hadji Diouf will make a signal with his eyes and the
drummers will speed up the rhythm. There is a special ‘Lions’ beat which gives the team inspiration, pushing them onwards toward victory”—Senegalese basketball players, on the other hand, are known for holding “rap attacks,” where local hip hop artists are invited to perform during the recesses in streetball games. Otherwise, players sometimes bring battery-powered stereos outside to blast music while they practice their hoop skills. For basketball tournaments, sponsors usually hire local DJs to spin records on turntables. In either case, Senegalese basketball is accompanied by a rather different soundtrack.

These two sports, then, reference different social logics, sometimes apposite, frequently in tension with each other. One is used to orient the political and economic aspirations of the nation, the other maps onto the private enterprises of players willing to jump through hoops to escape chronic unemployment.

Yet the lack of laboring possibilities is only one way youth have been excluded from participation in the postcolonial nation. Often they are blamed for the nation’s ills instead of pitied for the way their circumstances reflect the nation’s most pronounced forms of economic crisis. This, perhaps, is a partial explanation about why the idea of basketball’s deep past has erupted into youth consciousness in the way that it has. If it is true—as Mamadou Diouf suggests—that, “Logics of exclusion based on tradition, like those of the postcolony’s treatment of the young, render public space as an adult territory off limits to youth at the same time it denies them a private space (1996: 225-226), then privatizing their athletic aspirations by moving them off of football fields and into places where they can “court” neoliberalism would seem an understandable strategy. It then makes sense that basketball has cropped up in private schools, recreation centers, and corporate-sponsored camps. Even though it is possible the idea that basketball is
reproduced through the initiatives of individual schools and centers—engaged by athletes who each aspire to international celebrity or who, at least, hope to escape poverty—perhaps maps too easily onto the discourse touted by basketball experts and emissaries. What might this picture exclude? To put the question another way, is the rise of basketball indeed tied to the diminished status of the Senegalese nation-state? Does it signal the end of its executive functions, or has national government assumed a new role in this context? The following section returns to contemporary developments in Senegalese politics in part as a way to provide a preliminary answer for these questions.

**The state of Senegalese basketball**

Despite the nation’s legacy as a pioneer among African republics, the Presidency of Abdoulaye Wade has caused observers to scrutinize recent developments. The *British Broadcast News* has already posed a question others are, likewise, sure to consider, “Is Senegal’s ‘model democracy’ tarnished?”:

> When they voted for President Abdoulaye Wade in 2000, Senegalese citizens were expecting more transparency, more social justice and better governance than during the 40 years of rule by the Socialist Party (PS).

> During his years of struggle against the PS, Mr. Wade was charged with various offences, which he said were politically based, and often went on hunger strike to demand his freedom. But analysts now fear that he is using the police to sideline a potential rival in forthcoming elections.

The “potential rival” is Idrissa Seck, a man instrumental in Wade’s ascent to Head of State in 2000 but who, after widespread speculation that he might run for President, was held in police custody on “corruption allegations”—stemming from his alleged mismanagement for a road to be built between Dakar and Thiès—that most people found spurious. Subsequently, there were even more serious charges, and Mr. Seck was transferred to a prison, although the new charges were never made public.
A short time later, opposition leader Abdourahim Agne was charged with “threatening state security” after making a speech that encouraged Senegalese people to “go into the streets by the millions and demonstrate peacefully for change” so they might be able to improve the country’s “dire state.” The director of a film “examining Abdoulaye Wade’s election promises” Agne—his lawyer told reporters—“had been charged under laws banning attempts to overthrow the state.”^71

The state’s charge against Agne seemed to render explicit what was remained hidden behind the “more serious charges” added to the case against Seck after the fact of his arrest. This was a radical break from an earlier moment; President Wade and Seck were once so close that when Seck was first appointed Prime Minister of Senegal “he told the media that he knew the president so well that he did not even need directions to ‘transform Wade’s vision’ into concrete acts, claiming to be an embodiment of the President’s vision.” And yet, in the early months of 2005, rumors began circulating that Seck hoped first to have Wade displaced from the Presidency through means as unspecified as were clandestine, then to make sure he gained control over parliament in the elections of 2006, and ultimately to run for President in the elections of 2007. What was a political alliance disintegrated into a criminal conspiracy.

It is curious that treason should be the crime that calls Senegal’s “model democracy” into question, especially if—as others have noticed (Carter 2002, Buggenhagen 2003, Diouf 2003) and I have stressed—the Senegalese state insists its citizens seek opportunities for labor abroad so the economy can be infused with their remittances. If indeed Senegalese social life is increasingly borderless, the idea that

President Wade might accuse Idrissa Seck of "threatening state security" seems more than a little outrageous. And yet these charges confirm, rather than contradict, the picture I have sketched about Senegalese politics because the charge of treason is an effort to (re)constitute the legitimate domain of the nation-state.

As proof of this proposition, it is useful to consider why certain events that could otherwise be considered treasonous—and which, in other contexts, and eras probably would have—nevertheless were not considered so in the context in which they occurred.

When Timothy McVeigh was convicted for planting explosives which destroyed the Oklahoma Federal Building, and which resulted in the deaths of more than 168 people, because he felt the "American government" had "so betrayed the American people that a state of war exists between the two," he was ultimately "charged with mass murder but not treason." Or, for another non-treasonous act of espionage that is nevertheless seemingly so (Pietz 1997: 65-66):

When Navy intelligence analyst Robert Kim pled guilty to a single minor count of conspiracy to commit espionage for attempting to give seven classified defense documents to South Korea[,] [t]he government decided this act did no serious harm to U.S. interests; he simply wanted to help South Korea get a better price on the software for a maritime tracking system it was negotiating to buy from the United States.

This all suggests that from a certain vantage, the significance of treason has diminished in an era where many powerful nations are seek to expand their dominion through military inquest and through the increasing transnationalization of certain corporations that originate within them. Because of its contrasting quality, then, this idea help explains why treason allegations occur so frequently in postcolonial Africa. Besides the Wade-Seck affair, President Bingu wa Mutharika of Malawi, on Wednesday, January 5, 2005, accused three politicians of his former party with treason after, just a day before, they had
been charged with “breaching the peace.” The political officials had entered a meeting with the President, armed. But many onlookers considered this rationale so much pretext given that, as officers of the state, they are licensed to carry arms. President Mutharika though, it seems, suspected a coup plot.

As much as the Senegalese case, the incident in Malawi reveals treason to be on be one way of articulating political boundaries. Mutharika had achieved Malawi’s highest office through the efforts of former President Bakili Muluzi who, when he was denied a constitutional amendment that would have permitted him a third term, picked him to be presidential candidate for the United Democratic Front (UDF). In a surprising turnaround, less than a year later, Mutharika accused the party—and Muluzi—of trying to sabotage his campaign against corruption. So he split, forming the Democratic Progressive Party. While it is true that since Mutharika’s election last year, “several UDF leaders have been arrested in connection with corruption and fraud scandals” it is fascinating to note the frequency that treason is invoked as the primary political technology for reconstituting the sphere of privileged power.\(^{72}\)

Malawi, though, is marked by democracy’s conspicuous absence. Senegal, on other hand, retains a rather pristine reputation. Despite promoting treason charges in a way not unlike Mutharika, Wade is still publicly acknowledged to be “an advocate democracy.” Predictably perhaps despite recent missteps, many onlookers believe the outcome of the 2007 elections will be determined by Wade’s fidelity to the law:

If Wade allows the judiciary to bring to light the truths about the Thiès public works contracts, and acts severely against those found guilty, he will surely go

\(^{72}\) “Malawi leaders accused of treason,” *British Broadcast News*, Wednesday, 05 January 2005.
smoothly to the next elections, but if he fails to—he could face the anger of those same young men and women who cheerfully applauded him” after his 2000 victory... 

In the irony of all ironies, Africa’s oldest Head of State—dubbed the “Youth President” locally—might well be removed from office by the same powerful constituency that put him there.

But whether or not an overarching idea of the law will indeed prove to be the key variable remains to be seen. As the events of the preceding chapter indicate, Wade’s popularity often hinges on political spectacles whose consequences might worsen—rather than improve—the economic prospects and political liberties of Senegalese citizens. As such, ostensibly extra-legal domains—like those of sport—exert a powerful, though tragically unacknowledged, affect on political transformation. Few onlookers, for instance, discussed the significance of the fact that, on the same day that supporters gathered in Dakar to welcome Idrissa Seck home from prison after federal charges of corruption and treason against him were dropped, a rather different breed of “supporters” were glued to their television sets watching the national football team play Egypt in the African Nations cup semifinal. Perhaps the popular significance of the sport was ignored, or maybe, from an alternative reading, Seck was released on a day when the state realized people were most likely to be distracted.


74 Abdoulaye Wade is referred to as the “Youth President,” of course, first because 1) he spent many years in the political opposition—a state that mirrored the liminal social position of youth: a demographic characterized by in its inability to reproduce itself as part of Senegalese society. He also acquired this nickname because he secured his Presidency by tapping into the youth vote in a way unprecedented in Senegalese politics.

75 “Senegal ex-PM freed during match,” British Broadcast News, Wednesday, 8 February 2006.
And if indeed the source of Wade’s political power might soon prove to be the force behind his ouster, youth are ever more the key index of sustainable sociality in the Senegalese postcolony. Whether youth are criticized for criminal propensities, or praised for political participation, the young, male, Senegalese is the one upon whose shoulders the future of the nation is imagined to rest. Like the idea of Atlas this idea invokes, these youth are poised for spectacular performances of physical prowess and oriented toward the entire globe as—even more than the story of football—recent developments in the world of Senegalese basketball confirm.

“A significant physical predisposition”: Valorizing the male body

Despite the disproportionate attention given male basketball players in Senegal, it is widely acknowledged that Senegalese women have excelled in the sport for decades. As one publication commemorating the fortieth anniversary of the African Basketball Association stressed, “Le Sénégal a le plus riche palmarès de basket toutes catégories et sexes confondus [Senegal has the richest record in basketball in all categories and sexes].”

Curious, at the same time, is the way this “rich...record” hinges on certain assumptions about the Senegalese physique:

“D’aucuns ont avancé des predispositions physiques que posséderaient les Sénégalais pour expliquer les capacities de ce pays en basket.”

[The Senegalese possess a significant physical predisposition that explains this country’’s success in basketball].

This passage is especially fascinating because it appears sandwiched between a commentary on the sport’s alleged gender parity and the historical cultivation of a certain technical training in basketball:
En fait, le basket a toujours été populaire au Sénégal. Tres tôt il y eut des basketteurs très techniques qui enthousiasmèrent les foules, tel Alioune Diop…

[In fact, basketball has always been popular in Senegal. For some time, there have been very technical players like Alioune Diop, who excited spectators…]

This account even considers the way the sport was institutionalized in Senegal as a result of the fact that this country housed the best schools in French West Africa. So if indeed basketball has been played competitively by men and women in premier schools for a long time, why is there, in local and transnational discourses, so much privileging of superior physical predispositions?

And what explains the emphasis on the technical expertise of players like Alioune Diop, mentioned above? Why is it valued so much in the sphere of basketball?

It’s probably easiest to these pursue the answers by way of analogy with a sport that carries a rather different valence. Successful Senegalese football teams, it is widely acknowledged, rely on the sophisticated sorcery of local Islamic experts. Ritual technologies must be carefully deployed to produce the desired outcome: victory in competition. This is so much the case that every football team—from the neighborhood to the national level—has its own Islamic marabout.

These marabouts stay busy. When in the weeks preceding Senegal’s World Cup showdown with France, French football legend Zinédine Zidane was injured, Senegalese
media speculated that he was the victim of spiritual technologies local marabouts had prepared to sabotage his efforts.\textsuperscript{76}

On other occasions, the spiritual magic marabouts produce is less preventative even if no less powerful. In 2000, Senegal held an early lead over Nigeria in an African Nations Cup match until a former Nigerian Football Association official discovered and removed “a ‘charm’ that had been lying in the back of the net.” Despite Senegalese complaints, the device was confiscated. Nigeria then scored twice to win the match. In 2002, journalists argued Senegalese goalie Tony Sylva only went scoreless for 448 minutes because a sympathetic marabout had smeared a peculiar concoction along the goalposts he had been defending.\textsuperscript{77}

The Confederation of African Football—predictably perhaps as the official continent-wide governing body of this international sport—has indicated it is “no more willing to see witch doctors on the pitch than cannibals at the concession stand.” Nevertheless, as the \textit{Guardian} noted, “belief in traditional religions exists…nowhere more so than in Senegal, where many attribute[d] the rapid rise of French coach Bruno Metsu’s [World Cup] side as much to the work of marabouts—the heads of local Islamic brotherhoods who effectively act as intermediaries between believers and Allah—as to their coach’s tactical nous.”

Once, early in my research, when returning from a basketball game with some friends, I was asked to comment on the differences between Senegalese basketball and

\textsuperscript{76} “Zinédine Zidane victime des marabouts?” asked an anonymous \textit{L’Info} 7 (Mardi 28 Mai 2002) article asked. This, despite the fact that Zidane had predicted a difficult match against Sénégal (“Zidane prognostique un match difficile,” \textit{Le Soleil} Mardi 4 Décembre 2001).

\textsuperscript{77} “Magic of the cup: Muti, marabouts, and witch doctors—all bad for the game’s image,” \textit{Guardian Unlimited}, Sunday, 10 February 2002.
the sport as played in the U.S. "Well," I began, careful to measure my words, "The sport is a lot fancier in the U.S...more elaborate ball-handling. Better tricks."

Those in the car rapide [public transport] with me within earshot snickered, "That's because, here, the goal is to win," one person offered, condescendingly.

This explains why, more than a sphere where sorcery might potentially guarantee victory, basketball—receiving renewed attention and investment in the technocratic era of Senegalese neoliberalism—is imagined as a sphere where Directeurs de Technique [Coaches or Technical Directors] instill in players the discipline need to excel in competition.

This distinction resonates with the making of African modernity. When a British expedition sacked Benin City in 1897 they discovered "Altars covered with streams of dried blood," (Boisragon 1898: 187) which evidenced a fetishism promoted through magnificent spectacles of human sacrifice but which also "function[ed] as the general system of organizing African societies" (Pietz 2000: 54). For six years prior to this military invasion, British Consul-General James R. Phillips "had been urging Oba Overami, the king of Benin, to do two things," that would indicate Benin was ready to enter the realm of international commerce: 1) "to open his country to free trade (he had been exercising a monopoly over the flow of goods from the north and east whose custom was coveted by British merchants of the Royal Niger Company), and 2) "to abolish the practice of human sacrifice" (Pietz 2000: 53-54, my italics). Conquering Benin's (in)famous City of Blood, thus, brought the British closer to having trade with rational, rights-bearing subjects deemed worthy of recognition and brought Africa closer to having something like modern civil society which is why, in this moment, "Those who
cared most about the great cause of [David] Livingstone’s three C’s—commerce, Christianity, and civilization—exulted” in this moment and why a Christian journal of the time would gleefully report that, with the military conquest of Benin, the British had “successfully destroyed another stronghold of fetishism in Africa” (Pietz 2000: 54). Similarly it seems CAF, by stressing—as one spokesperson put it—that “Image is everything,” hopes to snuff out the propensity for “animal sacrifices” and “self-mutilation”—the “fetishis[tic]” interest in the “casting of spells,” wearing “lucky charms,” and manufacturing “odious concoctions” that lingers anachronistically into the present in the realm of football but not—praise God—in basketball.

And though the forthcoming claim must remain unqualified for the moment, I suspect the two most dominant genealogies of basketball that circulate in Senegal at present—and which, according to some interviewees, are very new—have a lot to do with this emphasis. Perhaps there is something about the dual imperatives of missionary and colonial education that—in the minds of many—have bequeathed a legacy to the sport that now renders athletes ready to compete in a moment when technical expertise and disciplined, ritualized, reinforcement, form the basis of a basketball prospect’s training regimen.

And, if indeed, these domains form the imagined ideological basis for participation in Senegalese basketball, the young male athlete is the prototype for such projects because, as a youth who might otherwise be economically marginalized, criminally minded, politically disempowered, he is imagined to have successfully battled the forces of postcolonial malaise that undercut ambition for so many of his peers. The idea of the Senegalese youth as the icon of a nation translates into projects where the
bodies of these ballplayers—and the free time to which they have access—are seized upon by coaches, trainers, and financiers who hope to objectify these aspects of Senegalese social life in contexts they can commodify.
Barefoot with a shoe fetish:
The circumstantial nature of commodification in postcolonial Senegal

“In contrast to Marx’s exchange values and Freud’s neurotic symptoms, however, black bodies do not typically present themselves as mysterious fetishes, or as ‘hieroglyphs’ wanting for intelligible social significance.”

Robert Gooding-Williams, “Look, a Negro”

“On the Trail of the Next”
For his May 2003 article, “On the Trail of the Next…” ESPN Magazine writer Cal Fussman decided he wanted to find “the next” great athlete. The next “Babe [Ruth], Pele, [Muhammad] Ali, or MJ [Michael Jordan].” Someone who could “join the roll call.”

But this task wouldn’t be easy. As Fussman sought help from his friend Joe Wooden he wondered, “How will I recognize this person?”

“Oh, you’ll know him,” he was assured, “because you won’t be able to take your eyes off him.”

This essay pursues a line of inquiry that departs from several different aspects of the exchange Fussman uses to open his article: first, the certainty that a young man will join the genealogy of older men that constitute the “roll call” of history’s greatest athletes. While the way Fussman poses his question (“How will I recognize this person?”) is gender neutral, the reply he receives—which he implicitly endorses by building on this statement without challenging its chauvinist assumptions—is that “he” is the one we’ve been waiting for. I am especially interested to examine the idea that Fussman will be able to identify “the next” sports superstar because he “we won’t be able to take [his] eyes off him.” This commitment is shared not simply by this pair but by the
many coaches, trainers, and athletic directors who, in preparing Senegalese athletes for competition, believe their task is made easier in a setting inhabited by people with the perfect "physique" for basketball. The sense is that one will naturally know the "next great One"—there will be little dispute or cause for debate; here it is believed the "eyes" will provide the most reliable assessment of this player's potential. The ideology of an optic expressed here is something I will soon discuss at greater length. First, though, before elaborating on the way this idea takes shape through ethnographic inquiry, I focus on the way this sentiment is expressed in Fussman's May 2003 article. In highlighting his construction of the Senegalese athlete, I will draw attention to the visual cues used to construct a subject with particular racial, gender, and—by logical extension—national allegiances besides possessing characteristics that self-appointed experts like Fussman use to arrive at a determination of an athlete's chances for making it to the pros and to produce authoritative narratives they circulate as if the evidence used to deduce these claims was self-evident.

In the legible characteristics used to assess a player's future profitability, one gains insight about the symbolic resonances that help structure the commercial transactions underway. In a certain sense, these athletes could be considered en route to commodification. From a different vantage, at least one of the players is already commodified. Treating the player, at least tentatively, as a commodity might help one to understand the complicated ways emotional inclinations and sentimental positions sometimes inadvertently structure commercial exchanges. This is not to say some of the players in this scenario do not aspire to capitalize from the value athletes generate, but
rather to suggest that actors can contribute to the building of the infrastructure of Senegal’s basketball industry even without harboring that aspiration.

At the heart of a commodity is a dialectic between use-value and exchange-value (cf. Mazzarella 2003). Scholars who subscribe to this claim develop a view of the commodity that breaks from the economistic notion that it is a simply a good that individuals exchange in formal markets. The anthropological literature on commodities provides the most sophisticated way to understand these objectified social forms. It nevertheless leaves one unprepared to theorize the scenario I discuss in this chapter. Anthropological work on the production of value (Sahlins 1972, Turner 1984, Munn 1996) focuses almost exclusively on non-monetized spheres: kula beads, the production of kinship networks among the Kayapo, the social reputation or “fame” that crystallizes in Gawa communities. Work not concerned with pre-capitalist or non-capitalist social matrices tends, on the other hand, only to discuss objects produced for sale: commodities in the strictest sense of the term (Mazzarella 2003). While attending to local nuances that give commodities their distinct shapes, this work still leaves us unprepared to theorize entities that become commodities by accident—that is, entities that are exchanged although their exchangeability is not foremost in the mind of the commodity producer. In fact, it is not even clear in such scenarios that, from the standpoint of the commodifiers, these entities even exist in objectified social form. In other words, participants in some of these contexts of commodification fail even to apprehend the object of commodification, much less their own role in the commercial transactions in which they are involved. This is an especially vexing problem when analysts consider the commodification of social actors. In what sense are flesh-and-blood human beings to be
considered commodities? Under what conditions? As a result of which processes? Can just part of a person be commodified?

In the effort to explore the complicated and serendipitous path commodities often take—as part of my interest in tackling the circumstantial nature of commodification and in improving our understanding of the way athletes become commodified—the following chapter discusses techniques of fragmentation and objectification that involve the image of a Senegalese basketball player published in the May 29, 2003 issue of *ESPN* magazine.

**Prototype: In search of the perfect Senegalese basketball physique**

proto-type *n*

1. something having the essential features of a subsequent type, and on which later forms are modeled
2. a standard example of a particular kind, class, or group
3. a first full-size functional model to be manufactured, for example, of a car or a machine
4. a primitive form believed to be the original type of a species or group, exhibiting the essential features of the later type

“I hope that you are the One. If not, you are the prototype.”

Andre 3000, “Prototype”

“If J. Lo could shoot the three [point shot]. Wouldn’t she be as big as Kobe, not least because *we couldn’t take our eyes off* her…Somewhere in the world there’s a kid who won’t be the next Babe, the next Pele, the next Ali, or the next MJ. This kid will not be the next anyone. He or she will offer *something we’ve never seen*, and by doing so will continue the roll call begun by the first four.”

Cal Fussman, ‘On the Trail of the Next…’

A few aspects of Fussman’s comment are especially striking. First, the “roll call” of world-historical athletes is racially and nationally diverse but nevertheless composed of all men (despite the fact that Fussman concedes “the next” kid might be a he or she).
Second, Fussman uses a black basketball player (in this case, Kobe Bryant) as his paradigm for what is sexy, although he remains convinced he is not as sexy as a Latina in his position would be. Third, the writer reveals his profound commitment to the belief that exceptional athleticism is something people determine, above all else, by watching athletes play. Not, for instance, by tracking their statistics or cataloguing their wins in tournament competition, or even by studying players to see how they respond in particular situations, managing specific tasks on the playing field. As Fussman indicates here, what makes an athlete “great” is the fact that we sometimes cannot “take our eyes off” of them, or that they tend to offer “something we’ve never seen.” Not something specially trained experts discern, necessarily, but some attribute, it seems, that is readily available to all who gaze at the athlete.

Fussman’s ESPN article chronicled hot new phenoms in a variety of sports. A seven-year old golf prodigy and ten-year old hockey goalie, both from the United States, are two of the athletes surveyed. In fact, with the exception of a lone female football player from Brazil, nearly all of the players Fussman discusses hail from this North American country. In his section on the future of basketball, by contrast, Fussman focuses on two Senegalese athletes: Little Jordan and the Shoeless One. Fussman’s narrative is compelling, not simply because he chose players from this west African nation to represent what is quickly becoming the world’s biggest global sport, because he was especially awestruck with one of the players in particular, because of the racially loaded and sexually charged imagery he deploys to describe the athletes, or even because Fussman seems convinced that one of the players—who is actually less talented than his counterpart—has a great chance of making it to the pros while the other—who seems to
possesses tremendous ball-handling skills—is not likely to make it. Besides communicating these ideas, Fussman’s narrative reveals an ambivalence to the success basketball has achieved in its reigning world capital—the U.S.—and suggests, however surreptitiously, that the role Senegalese players are expected to play if they are recruited to that terrain is one in which they will be expected to help remedy the demise of the sport, in certain fundamental ways, as basketball has evolved in its homeland. If Fussman’s narrative is representative of dominant views concerning Senegalese basketball players, as I believe it is, these athletes are expected not simply to help American franchises win, but to help resolve certain contradictions that have emerged as part of the way basketball is understood and negotiated in the United States. The ESPN article in question, thus, speaks to the way Senegal fits into a particular “geographic imagination” (Trouillot 2003: 8) of basketball.

This anticipated role these athletes are expected to play becomes clearer as Fussman sizes up the Senegalese prospects. The young man’s talent immediately impresses Fussman. Speaking first about Mouhamed Rassoul Seck (Little Jordan), “Lord, can he dribble,” is the writer’s first thought, aloud. At the same time, Fussman seems convinced this is not tomorrow’s superstar: “I know right away he’s not the Next One: he’s too small and his shot needs work.” At the basketball camp in Thiès where he makes this determination, Fussman had actually lost interest in the athletes he was observing until a player catches the attention of a coach, which causes him to take notice as well: “…a flicker in Tony Harvey’s eyes snaps back my attention” (and as Fussman has already indicated, that’s the way it is supposed to happen).
His interest now peaked, and who should the ESPN sportswriter see “gliding easily around the rim” but a player “as smooth as melted caramel.” Inquiring about the young man who moves so effortlessly, Fussman learns from other spectators that he is only 13 or 14, despite being between 6’6” and 6’7”.

Taken aback by the ballplayer’s “smooth” play and appearance, Fussman moves “toward him” before being admonished by his translator and encouraged to step aside by the small crowd of people assembling around the player.

“‘Leave him,’ my translator pleads, as the human knot tightens. ‘This is a small place. If you single him out, his life will become very difficult. Please—not now!’”

The sportswriter agrees and moves aside, but not before a Senegalese man who once played pro basketball in France hands his pair of size 15 shoes to the young man who, according to Fussman, was playing in “bare feet.” Prevented from even being able to ask the player his name, the writer dubs him “the Shoeless One.”

As far as ESPN was concerned, the kid was a natural-born athlete. This much was clear, not simply from his verbal description, but from the way the magazine frames his photographs.

In one scene, the young man appears with his shirt off. Not especially muscular, he still seems very fit; not like he works out, but like he manages to maintain his physique without a formal program. The player’s picturesque image is foregrounded to contrast with a baobab tree that looms in the distance.
The baobab is Senegal’s national symbol. Connoting strength, virility, and resilience, it surfaces in a number of proverbs. Its presence bespeaks power. In this image, it suggests the player’s natural environment predisposes him to a physical prowess that, paradoxically, becomes a priceless asset in athletic competition. Running through nature’s blacktops, he is already endowed with the talent needed to fulfill his wildest dreams. This, his baobab littered field, is the place where he must hone his skills until the structures in the distance some day become skyscrapers in the basketball capital of the world.

It’s hard to know exactly what Fussman meant by calling this young player “the Shoeless One,” but the work it does for casting a particular relationship between a player and his potential is too important to be ignored. The original “Shoeless One” is of course “Shoeless” Joe Jackson, the Chicago White Sox All Star whose legendary status was tarnished by his being implicated in a game-fixing scandal.

As his discussion of sports history makes clear, Fussman is generally aware of the way dominant sentiments about a player’s character shape that athlete’s popular reception. Beyond that, he understands well how “Shoeless” Joe’s legacy is implicated in the structure of baseball spectatorship. In his discussion, in this same article, about how Babe Ruth became such an important American icon, Fussman cites this controversy as being at the root of it all:

“Ruth arrived at just the right moment—after baseball had been scarred by the Blacksox scandal…”

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79 Michel Perron, Governor of the Colonies, in his 1926 report issued by the Commitee of Historical and Scientific Studies in French West Africa (Comité d’Etudes Historiques et Scientifiques de l’A.O.F.) mentioned a village known as Toumba-Ba made famous because of a baobab tree located there. In this region, it was said of a baobab that ‘only in the hollow of “his” trunk and under “his” boughs will a person be safe from abuse and blows’.
For reasons that become more and more clear as this chapter unfolds, Senegalese athletes are among those expected to heal “scars” that have arisen from the contradictions of American sport.

*From baobabs in barren lands to the “Field of Dreams”*

The “scandal” to which Fussman refers is well-known in baseball lore. “Shoeless” Joe Jackson and seven of his teammates were permanently suspended from the league after being convicted of taking bribes in order to throw the 1919 World Series. The White Sox were a force during the first few decades of the twentieth century and produced a number of stand-out talents, but the team was plagued by dissension thanks to an owner—Charles Comiskey—who promised expensive gifts to players as an incentive to win, but who often failed to deliver, thereby encouraging resentment for the team and the sport more generally. It was in this context that gamblers were eager to bet on games and many elite players, especially on the White Sox Team, felt they were not sufficiently compensated for their contributions to Major League Baseball.

What makes the “Blacksox scandal” so curious though, as far as Jackson is concerned, is that although he took the money, no one could ever prove he had done anything to deliberately lose the games. During the series, he had batted an incredible .375, committed no errors, and had twelve hits, which included the only homerun of the series.

Jackson was redeemed, to some extent, through the 1992 hit movie, *Field of Dreams*. In it, Kevin Costner plays Ray Kinsella who, as a thirty-six year old man, is married with a young child and a newly acquired farm. Kinsella is out tending to his
crops one day when a mysterious voice suddenly reveals to him: *If you build it, he will come.*

‘If you build *what, who* will come?’ his wife Annie wonders, and Ray is initially at a loss for words. He soon discovers, though, the *who* is Shoeless Joe and the *what* is a baseball field. As an older man, Ray is distressed by the feeling that he is becoming an old fogey like his father, who recently passed. As a young man at Berkeley in the 60s, we are told, Ray caused his father a great deal of emotional stress and heartache. Though Ray is around the same age his father was when they started to have problems, he refuses to let his youth slip away. Speaking about this estranged parent, Ray tries to help his wife, Annie, understand how he feels: “*The man never did one spontaneous thing in his life. He had dreams. He may have even heard voices. But he never did anything about it.*”

Understanding how much it means to him, Annie consents and Ray mows down the bulk of his corn crop to build a replica major league baseball field. The decision seems like a bad one at first since the diminished crop leads to revenues so meager the family finds it hard to pay their bills. But one day, as Ray and Annie are having a dramatic argument about finances, their daughter interrupts to let them know there is “a man on her daddy’s lawn.”

The man, of course, is “Shoeless” Joe.

The scene emerging in postcolonial Senegal is, in some sense, a parody of these cinematic events set in the postindustrial Midwest.

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80 That we know nothing about Ray Kinsella’s mother affirms that such a narrative is often profoundly gendered. It is, in many ways, a crisis concerning the intergenerational transmission of masculinity, as much as it is anything else.
Ray’s cornfield-turned-baseball field parallels the droughts that facilitated Senegal’s postcolonial agricultural decline. In the years immediately preceding independence, Senegal was one of the world’s leading peanut producers. But a series of droughts in subsequent years (1968, 1970, 1972, 1973) destroyed the profit-earning potential of Senegal’s best soil (Diop n.d., Youm 1991). The story about the production of this baseball field, too, mirrors the way youth and state officials alike use sports to structure their pursuits of prosperity (chapter 3).

The Senegalese government has seized upon the recent success of the national football team (especially in the 2002 World Cup) and credits itself with providing the resources that made this achievement possible. Elsewhere, it has enabled the pursuit of careers in professional sports for young people committed to escaping economic destitution by whatever means they can mobilize. In these efforts, young people experience themselves as having the power to determine their own destinies if they can summon the sufficient will power, and remain dedicated to their crafts. At the same time, though, it must be acknowledged that they are locked into a complicated relationship with transnational corporations (like ESPN), non-governmental organizations (such as the Centre de Bopp), and federal agencies (the Ministry of Youth and Sports, being one example) that have a stake in the outcome of these processes.

So, in both instances, crops gave way to fields of dreams. In each scenario, youth is a potent reservoir from which to draw so that one can progress in life. In either case, too, ‘sporting faith’ (Silverstein 2000) is structured by a generational tension.

Ray Kinsella believed building a baseball field constituted his only opportunity to reclaim his youth by developing a platform through which he could cultivate childhood
dreams. In defiance of his father’s dispassionate stoicism, he believed a meaningful life could only be achieved by acknowledging and appreciating his passion for sport.

For Senegalese youth, dreams of pursuing successful careers in sport follow on the heels of a generation for whom the promise of independence was a sufficient condition of imaginative possibilities. They therefore seek to unhitch themselves from the assumption that government can guarantee employment opportunities and that devotion to the national project is enough to secure collective prosperity. By exploring innovative economic enterprises—whether these lie in daylight or twilight economies (Werner 1993), wall street or beat street (Benga 2002), New York or Dakar (Diouf 2000)—they challenge the normative assumptions about how social reproduction occurs. In the process, they are articulate new (inter)national circuits of land, labor, and capital, creating new geographical developments in the process (Appadurai 1996: 37, Harvey 2002: 75).

The story of Shoeless Joe Jackson is fitting and compelling, not simply because so many of the elements obtain in contemporary Senegal but because Ray’s redemptive narrative in Field of Dreams ultimately runs counter to the aspirations of Senegalese ballplayers. Our Hollywood protagonist constructed a field where his childhood hero could play once again, for the love of the game instead for a love of money that had led to his demise; in other words we are taught that no amount of money measures up against an appropriate moral code. In contrast, these young athletes benefit from the legacy of a colonial, religious, and pedagogic project aimed at making them virtuous in order to become hoop virtuosos whose skills will garner them exorbitant wages in the marketplace.
of sport (chapter 2). Here no amount of morality is a sufficient substitute for the money expected to alleviate economic desperation.

But what should be taken away from this brief excursion into the history of an American sports scandal is that the Senegalese “field of dreams”—littered, as it is, with ancient baobabs—is here imagined, by Cal Fussman at least, as a terrain in which athletes play (barefoot and all) for the love of the game.

Fussman’s article is considered at length here not simply because he throws so many of this chapter’s central themes into sharp relief, but because the story he tells is actually implicated in recent attempts to invest in Senegalese basketball talent, as my ethnographic investigation revealed.

One clue concerning this relationship came from Mamadou Ndiaye, coach of Senegal’s national military basketball team, ASFA (Association Sportive des Forces Armées), from whom I learned that a basketball academy had recently been founded in Thiès by Amadou Galo Fall, a Senegalese who, I was told, had once played pro basketball in Tunisia.

Interested in learning more about this effort to educate young people and simultaneously develop such a mighty infrastructure for this sport—and encouraged by the fact that I could, perhaps, dig up some info on the “Shoeless One” while in Thiès—I headed to the rural city to see what I could find.

**At the Center of Sports and Development**

I was assured by various friends and colleagues in the Senegalese athletic world that I should go straight to CNEPS (Centre National d’Éducation populaire et Sportive). Being the local “center” for sports, I was assured that I could find whatever I needed there. I
had made an appointment to see Biram Khary Ndoye, Director of the Center, and was led to his office as soon as I arrived at the facility.

Passing through the armed entrance, I headed to main the administrative office for my meeting. My conversation with Director Ndoye was insightful, not simply because he provided a useful narration about the significance of sport in postcolonial Senegal but because he impressively linked his own perception of anthropological discourse concerning body techniques to his own attitudes about the Senegalese athlete’s technical capacity for sport, the nation’s ongoing youth labor crisis in the era of “globalization” (his term) and, simultaneously, provided an argument about the moral valence of Senegalese basketball that has laid the foundation for the style of bodily comportment coaches and recruiters prefer. For these reasons, the following interview is a useful point of intersection for these theoretical and ethnographic issues.

The Director’s office was spacious and well-furnished. I settled into a plush leather chair directly across from Ndoye, who was positioned on the other side of the massive mahogany desk.

It took more than an hour, but the interview went well. Beyond well, really. Based on the depth and intricacy of his responses, I later concluded the Director was either very bombastic or had memorized an elaborate treatise for the occasion. I suspect it was some combination of the two.

Trying to gain some insight about the immediate context, I first asked if Thiès was implicated in the history of French colonial sport and, if so, how? He responded that Thiès was central to that history:
Thiès, CNEPS specifically, was actually the place where French colonial officials sent physical education instructors to be trained. Since the time of colonization, the center had trained a number of coaches and physical education instructors for Senegal and West Africa more generally. It was the ‘headquarters’ of the project.  

He spoke with great admiration for Thiès’ place in the history of French colonial sport, for Thiès as a key site of a colonial project. But it was a particular rendition of colonialism, understandably appropriate to his immediate concerns. Ultimately, his reconstruction resurrected the moment without the harsh realities of servitude, intimidation, and duress that characterized it, by most historical accounts.

I wondered, though, whether this idea of French rule in Senegal had some basis in the particular kind of colonialism practiced in Thiès. The city was, after all, one of the four communes—one of a few special sites in Senegal where French authorities experimented with giving Senegalese peoples most of the rights enjoyed by French citizens (Diouf 1998). From the ethnographic context, it was difficult to discern, but perhaps physical education had been the vehicle for transmitting a particular set of ideals that encouraged Senegalese peoples to see themselves as part of French civilization, just as basketball plays the same role for a more recent generation concerned with implicating itself in American civilization.  

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81 It was the “tête de point” to use his terminology.

82 The shift in emphasis, by Senegalese youth, from France to the United States parallels a shift in the orientation of the Senegalese state. For more about this new network, see Lara Pawson’s (2004) article, ‘France tackles U.S. trend,’ in BBC News:

‘French President Jacques Chirac holds talks with Senegal’s President Abdoulaye Wade in Paris on Thursday. The meeting comes as France-Senegalese ties appear to be under pressure, largely due to the West African state’s more recent friend - the United States. France, the former colonial power, remains Senegal’s biggest donor and trading partner. Dakar has played down the talks, insisting that relations are very good...But skeptics say the meeting is a chance for Paris to remind Senegal who pays out millions of dollars in donor assistance each year.’
While the specific details of Ndoye’s narrative should be treated cautiously, the significance of Thiès as a site where the French institutionalized athletic instruction was supported by documentary evidence. I recalled as much from my work in the Senegalese national archives. Soon after independence, it explained:


À cette époque, ce département comprenait seulement le service de l’éducation populaire, de la Jeunesse et des Sports et le Centre national d’Éducation physique [CNEP].  

[The] Secretary of the State to Youth and the Sports, Aliou Tall, became Minister for Youth and the Sports…the decree 61.54 P.R. S.G. of May 13, 1961 marked the departure of Aliou Tall from [the Ministry of ] Youth and the Sports and [witnessed] the arrival of Mr. Amadou Babacar Sarr as the head of this department.

At that time, this department was really only responsible for providing services with regard to popular education, [the Ministry of] Youth and Sports, and the National Center of Physical Education. The prominent position attained by CNEP (now CNEPS) at the dawn of independence speaks to the power cultivated in this domain—with respect to recreation—in the decades prior.

Ndoye insisted on the deep historical roots of this concern with physical education, however vague his references to specific curricula, “Since the time of the French…there was recreational sport. CNEP,” he explained, “was the first school in Africa for sport and education for Gabon, Guinea, and Mali [besides Senegal].” Ndoye’s

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use of Africa, here, for the territories of French west Africa suggests his vision of
Senegal’s relationship with the other countries mentioned is filtered through the lens of
French empire.

The CNEPS Director continued, “In the years following independence in Africa,
for about twenty to thirty years, Senegal dominated the premier teams in Africa [in
various sports]. Senegalese athletes [due to their location in the heart of the physical
education movement, it seems] possessed the best physical condition of any country in
west Africa.” This explains why, as he had mentioned before, “Senegalese trainers were
the energy or force driving physical education programs in schools everywhere.”

This point prepares us to unravel yet another aspect of Cal Fussman’s report on
sport in Senegal. As he indicates in the same article mentioned above, while passing by
La Corniche—a beach located near downtown Dakar—he was astonished by the number
of Senegalese lifting weights, running, doing push-ups, and wrestling, all without anyone
to supervise or enforce these training regimens. “There are no coaches,” he was
astonished to find, “just Senegalese in love with sport,” in the place where “blurry legs
spin out sprints.”

Director Ndoye’s testimony provides us with the context to situate Fussman’s
casual remarks. In describing the way French colonial officials institutionalized schools
of physical education throughout the region he made use of the French verb, formé,
which carries the sense not just of having educated someone, but of having built them.

“C’est ça qui est perpetuée [That is the aim perpetuated today],” he was sure to
inform me.

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Ndoye’s comments then drifted into a treatise on, appropriately enough, Marcel Mauss and his theoretical insights concerning *les techniques du corps* [body techniques], ritualized movements whose internalization is so profound as to camouflage the fact they are institutionalized as part of a broader historical process.

“Tu étudie l’anthropologie [You study anthropology],” he looked at me expectantly, “Tu connais Mauss et les technique du corps, alors [So, you must know Mauss and the concept of body techniques].”

The way he used the concept of “body techniques,” though, was inconsistent with the way anthropologists typically deploy the concept: Ndoye didn’t understand it as a bodily practice which stems from ritually reinforced activity that eventually becomes so natural it seems to arise from instinct, for participants. Instead, he spoke about “body techniques” when referring to practices that he considered to be characteristic of Senegalese subjects. Ndoye seemed to overlook the way these performative “techniques” were transmitted (through for instance, in the case basketball, *Directeurs de Technique*) in specific local contexts.

Switching from French back to Wolof, Ndoye led me in the direction of his own perspective on the matter which, as I have indicated, disregarded the historical specificity of the practices he chose to highlight, “The Senegalese ballet,” Ndoye suggested to me, “is a body technique.” Building on this insight, his thoughts drifted closer to the form of movement that concerned us more immediately. “In terms of basketball, we have adapted an American style of play. Blacks are very good at adapting [to this kind of sport]. Blacks have successfully adapted the character, the rhythm, the spirit—all of this, from the circumstances in which they have found themselves.”
By use of the term “Blacks,” here, it was clear he meant both “black” Americans and “black” Africans. If I had any doubts about what the term signified, all that would be cleared up by the remarks that followed next, where Ndoye explained why Senegalese people have a natural advantage when it comes to sport, especially basketball. His argument rested on a stereotype common to scouts, coaches, and youth alike about the inherent physical characteristics of people who inhabit this corner of west Africa:

“On est très grand…un homme Senegalais est un homme très grand [We are very tall. A Senegalese man is a very tall man],” In Senegal it is never difficult to find a man—or even a woman—who measures 2 meters in height. [For that reason] anthropology and anthropometry are absolutely the best approaches for understanding [Senegalese] basketball.”

Corresponding, it seems, to the “best” methods for studying and measuring human beings, respectively.

Ndoye’s happenstance anthropometry was evident in the claim about how tall Senegalese men and women tend to be naturally. However dubious, there is a wealth of French travel literature that confirms the preponderance of this stereotype. Anthropology, on the other hand, is needed to make sense of subsequent comments (whether or not one deploys anthropological analysis in the same way Ndoye had envisioned).

“We have rhythm,” he said matter-of-factly, gesturing expansively to indicate that all black people were included in this judgment. “Ours is a communal culture. Basketball is a rhythmic sport that facilitates…success…this way. We have integrated rhythm as part of our skill set. It is part of our ‘body techniques.’”

Ndoye’s comments, here, overlap with the sense once conveyed by American journalist Michael Novack (1988) that African American playing styles are naturally jazzy. In both cases, a historically derived “body technique” slips into an assumption
about the racial essence black people share. The message has an added element in this
scenario, though, in that Ndoye is making these comments as a man who is, in many
ways geographically, culturally, and historically removed from African Americans: the
group with which he believes he shares a racial affinity. This is not to suggest that he has
no basis for making this claim—indeed comparison and contrast are the constitutive
features of all diasporic discourses (Warren 2001, Edwards 2003). Yet it is precisely
because historically derived and culturally mediated “articulations” (Edwards 1998)
between African Americans and Africans can be characterized by both conflict and
consensus, that it becomes interesting to ponder why, when, and where discourses focus
more on one tendency than the other.

At any rate, Ndoye’s argument was not racial in any straightforward way.
Though blackness is, in one sense, the basis for his claim that African American and
Senegalese populations are linked, skin color is not the specific form through which this
relationship is articulated, here. Rather, it is through the domain of *style* that he imagines
these disparate populations are joined.

At the same time, Ndoye did not mean to suggest that sport was altogether
unscientific. Remember, one’s technique—or skill set of “body techniques”—is crucial
to “success” in sport. And beyond that, there is always that ability “black” people seem
to share:

*Basketball est un sport de precision, mais c’est un sport de rythme
egalement. Pour les vrais basketeurs c’est comme un facon de danse...
suspension dans l’air.*

[Basketball is a sport of precision, but it is also a rhythmic sport.
For real basketball players, the sport is like a dance. (A form of) being
suspended in air.]
As the CNEPS Director elaborated his argument about the performative aesthetics of race, subsequent statements made it even more clear that a specific mediated image served as the primary vehicle through which he constituted a very specific notion of diaspora, “Tout ce que Jordan a fait, par example...ça c’est la musicalité [Everything that (Michael) Jordan did, for instance...it was musical].”

As I reviewed my conversation with the Director in the days following our interview, I was struck by the fact that Jordan had come up in many of my interviews. It soon appeared to me this player’s legacy was crucial to the way Senegalese athletes and coaches developed local notions of bodily comportment, and was a key frame of reference for recruiters concerned with finding a player who could reproduce key elements of MJ’s reign in the NBA.

**Be like Mike?**

One of the first references to Michael Jordan I can recall came during an interview with Mamadou Ndiaye coach of the national military team, which goes by the acronym ASFA (Association Sportive des Forces Armées). When I first met Coach Ndiaye, he had introduced himself by use of his nickname “Modu.” Then, afraid he was being too informal, he provided his birth name “Mamadou.”

I had to force back a smile. That same day, a friend of mine had explained the significance of the name “Modu,” at least as far as Senegalese men abroad were concerned.

The term “Modu” is an abbreviated form of the word “Mamadou,” a popular Senegalese name for men and an Africanized version of the Islamic name Muhammed. When abroad, Senegalese men often assume the name “Modu,” especially when dealing
with local authorities. This has become a strategy for avoiding persecution or harassment by the state.\textsuperscript{84} For instance, if the police arrive one day for questioning and ask a Senegalese man for his name, he might simply say, “Modu.” If pressed for a last name, he will say “Modu Modu.” In this way, it becomes increasingly difficult for the authorities to pin any violation on a particular person.

In this instance, though, I suspected that Coach Mamadou Ndiaye was giving me the name friends and family affectionately used for him.

I hoped, at least, that I didn’t remind him of state-sponsored harassment.

From the interview I learned that Ndiaye began playing basketball at age 13 when he relocated to new neighborhood after his father, who had previously raised him as a single parent, was assigned to a military post where he could not take his son. Realizing he had no friends or family his own age close by, Ndiaye’s uncle signed him up with a local basketball team.

By age 19, Ndiaye’s team won the national championship in their division (senior). Soon afterwards he was recruited to ASFA. That same year, he was selected for the Senegalese national team, with whom he played for twelve years. During this time, they competed in tournaments in Canada, the United States (Miami, New York, Boston), Tunisia, and Italy.

When asked what drove his interest in basketball especially since, when he was a child, football was definitively Senegal’s most popular sport, Ndiaye spoke at length about Michael Jordan.

\textsuperscript{84} This technique has proven especially useful for the overwhelming majority of Senegalese people working overseas as street vendors, often in locations where it is difficult to acquire the paperwork needed to sell their wares legally. As a result, they are vulnerable to persecution by law enforcement officials.
He had first seen Jordan play, when the superstar was still at the University of North Carolina. Ndiaye told me he and other teammates often assembled at the one of the homes of the only player with cable television to watch college basketball, even though only “big games” were shown and even these often aired at odd hours of the morning and night. The NCAA was their “reference” for basketball during his time, he explained to me.

“I learned a lot there,” Ndiaye insisted. Just what he meant by “there” was not exactly clear, but it seemed to me he meant that his exposure to NCAA basketball taught him a great deal about the sport and perhaps, by extension, how it should be played. The truth of this claim is impossible to assess. Its significance, instead, lies in the Ndiaye’s impression of these mediated events.

Hearing Ndiaye speak, he suddenly represented so many Modus, huddled around their television sets, studying moves and techniques cultivated by American ballplayers. Basketball, of course, has been in Senegal since the early decades of the twentieth century, but since the “jazzy” style of play that characterizes basketball in the United States is one that stems from the sport’s unique history in that locale (as, in part, a legacy of segregation and economic marginalization, cf. Ralph n.d.), it makes sense these techniques might take careful attention to emulate.

With these issues in mind, I started to think more about Cal Fussman’s favorable discussion of “Little Jordan.” Recall the young man had been described as possessing incredible ball-handling abilities, obviously the result of hours spent cultivating such skill. During a drill Fussman witnessed, he noticed the young player, “searching for a second ball to complement the one that never leaves his hand.” And to the fact that this
youngster is known locally as “Little Jordan,” Fussman responds—matter-of-factly—that “his head is shaved like Mike’s.” While the youngster was known locally for having a style of play similar to MJ, the sportswriter insists there is an uncanny physical resemblance, as well.

And it doesn’t end there. When Fussman accompanies the young player and his father home, he indicates that he is immediately “confronted”—if not altogether overwhelmed—“by the power of Michael.” The sportswriter tells us that, “Mouhamed[Little Jordan]’s prized possession is a poster of Michael Jordan almost as big as he is.” And that, “Since he first saw MJ on TV, Mouhamed has devoted his life” to the “dream” of playing professional basketball in the United States.

Like Ndoye and Ndiaye, Mouhamed apparently sees Michael Jordan’s aesthetic as crucial to the formation of a Senegalese subject that is ready to participate in the world of professional basketball. But there is more happening here than Fussman’s account of Little Jordan’s postcolonial hoop dreams takes into consideration.

It is important to highlight that, by his own admission, Michael Jordan was the impetus behind Fussman’s search for “tomorrow’s” basketball star:

“The idea to find the Next One came shortly after Jordan announced his second retirement, in 1999. The journey ended shortly after he announced his final retirement last month...”

With this mission in mind, it becomes easier to understand how Fussman could become fixated with a miniature version of the player whose disappearance seems so disconcerting for him.

Ever since Michael Jordan left the NBA, there has been a profound nostalgia about the kind of player he represented. As mentioned before, the writer is skeptical
about Little Jordan’s chances for becoming a world-class athlete, and yet, the legacy of Michael Jordan is central to the way basketball experts envision the kind of Senegalese athlete they seek to recruit.

Beyond that, Fussman’s narrative reveals the preoccupation with a particular kind of ideal—a clean-cut athlete (with a bald head, one as “smooth as caramel”)—rather than the braided, hip-hop persona characteristic of players like Allen Iverson that populated the NBA in the immediate post-MJ period. Iverson’s status as an American basketball icon is confirmed by the fact that, after Jordan was gone for good, his jersey quickly became the NBA’s most popular piece of merchandise. Yet in Fussman’s article, neither Iverson, nor any members of his cohort are mentioned as basketball greats, although there is a four-year lapse between the time Jordan retired in 1999 and Fussman’s article in 2003. Thus, despite the fact that Fussman is writing against the backdrop of what has been happening most recently in the NBA, these developments are repressed in his discussion of basketball.

If Michael Jordan’s clean-cut image and notorious apoliticism (Tucker 1998) facilitated the ease with which the NBA won hearts, the players who took over the lead in his stead have been rather more controversial. When Iverson, for instance, accepted his Rookie of the Year Award, he sported a swim cap and baggy sweatpants. This particular form of dress is often associated with the hip hop cultural stylings that have, similarly, rocked mainstream America, and not simply because AI was, himself, working on a rap album until criticism of the vulgar lyrics in advanced copies encouraged him to pull the plug on that project. And beyond the semiotic subversion of what we might refer to as the “new” NBA, public relations nightmares like the (in)famous Indiana Pacers-Detroit
Pistons brawl—involving fans and players—most likely have a lot to do with the League’s recent efforts to tighten conduct and recast its image. This aim is most clearly expressed in the new NBA dress code which, besides requiring players to don business casual attire when arriving at games, prohibits wearing headphones or exposed necklaces, clearly targeting one demographic more than all others.

What’s most significant for me, more specifically, is the distinction apparent in the way Africans and African American players are sorted. As evidence of the way ideas about African players become embedded in popular lore, the free on-line encyclopedia, Wikipedia, depicts Dikembe (Mutombo Mpolondo Mukama Jean Jacques wa) Mutombo as “a well-known humanitarian.” Mentioning that he attended Georgetown University through a USAID scholarship, it is careful to mention that he is fluent in English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Lingala, Tshiluba and other African languages. Mutombo’s linguistic sophistication even became fuel for a joke between rival basketball powerhouses Georgetown and Duke University, where supporters of the former claimed he spoke more languages than the latter’s entire team and coaches.85

TIME Magazine celebrated Mutombo in its April 28, 2003 feature on “Amazing People” and his cover story—“On the Shoulders of a Giant”—and praises his work ethic, indicating that the “big man” is considered a “player…who works his tail off every time he steps onto the floor.” This aspiration for excellence, it seems, was evident early in the “relentless” young man who always “wanted to be a doctor.” Consequently, he “work[ed] hard” for the opportunity to “study abroad” so he could later “return to the

85 The article mentions, as well, that Mutombo was alleged to frequent D.C.-area bars demanding, “Who wants to sex Mutombo?” but was quick to position this story as “one of the more interesting urban legends of the college basketball world.”
Congo to help his countrymen” which he now does through his non-profit organization, The Dikembe Mutombo Foundation. Mutombo’s “humanitarian[ism]” extends even to two nieces and two nephews he adopted as his own children, buying homes form them and providing them the opportunity to attend school in the U.S.

Sudanese standout Manute Bol is also often discussed in flattering terms, considered active in charitable causes. Throughout his career, Bol is credited with having visited Sudanese refugee camps even before establishing the Ring True foundation so that he could raise money for them. He even ran a basketball school in Cairo, Egypt, where one new NBA star—also originally from the Sudan—Luol Deng, was present.

Deng, the son of Sudan’s former cabinet minister, grew up in the United Kingdom once his family was granted political asylum there. Feeling from a place where “women and children” are often “sold into slavery,” Deng “turned his height (6ft 8in) to his advantage, The Guardian reports in its article “The tall guy,” about the new Chicago Bulls star. “Basketball got us a long way. It gave us education,” Luol’s older brother Ajou affirms. And, beyond the opportunity to play sport, Aldo Deng—the father—believes it is the economic infrastructure of Britain that laid the groundwork for his family’s subsequent success. In the same Guardian article he insists, “Our family has been supported by British taxation. All my children [prior to Luol, presumably] have finished university and even I got involved in studying. We are very grateful…”

Many African American players, Allen Iverson being but one example, are very active in charitable causes as well. Yet this fact is not mentioned in his Wikipedia profile, nor do sportswriters tend to highlight this fact more generally. They do emphasize his criminal charges of gun possession from a few years ago, on the other hand. And while
Manute Bol was charged with assault and battery on his own daughter, this fact receives far less attention.

The varied narratives about African basketball players all stress the dire political circumstances from which they are alleged to have arisen, the diligence through which they transcended these circumstances, and the humanitarianism they promote as evidence of their “gratefulness” and, perhaps even, their inherent nobility.

But the particular disdain with which many African American basketball players are presently viewed which contrasts, profoundly, with the way African athletes are viewed goes beyond the efforts of the NBA or the inclinations of one particular sportswriter. They have implications even more profound than the way certain racial stereotypes drive sports spectatorship and reporting. What is crucial to consider about the perception that “little,” “shoeless,” “tall guy[s]” and “giants” spring up all over Africa is the way that sport, as we know it, entails a particular perspective concerning—and attitude about—people who live in this particular part of the world. The nicknames “baby Shaq” and “Little Jordan”—in other words—reveal more than affectionate diminutives or Americanized nicknames, they speak to a legacy of paternalism that is part and parcel of a postcolonial gaze through which African subjects are sorted, characterized, and (de)valued.

It fits with “the mythology of the noble savage celebrated by the romantic movement” (Curtin 1964: 34). With regard to this modern moment, it is clear that, ”The symbolic terrain of a rarely-seen Africa, [even] then, was being shaped by a cascade of narratives that strung together motley ‘scientific facts’ and poetic images—facts and
images surveyed by an ever more roving European eye” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 87).

It might, at first, seem a stretch to link the attitude of this ESPN journalist to the colonial attitudes about Africa, but “travelers’ accounts, colonial surveys, ethnographic reports, and fictional utopias” always overlap and cross-fertilize each other. “We now claim to distinguish clearly between” these different genres and “[s]uch cataloguing is useful, but only to some extent” (Trouillot 2003: 14).

Jean and John L. Comaroff identify this propensity to create an “imagined landscape of Africa” as a legacy of European modernity while our immediate context is that of an American observer in an ostensibly “postmodern” or “globalized” one. Still, as Trouillot (2003) suggests, these attitudes are cut from the same cloth. Beyond that, this dissertation is concerned with precisely this historical dynamic: the way the U.S. has, in many ways, displaced France and other European powers to assert itself as a force to be reckoned with in the postcolonial world, including this particular foray into the Senegalese athletic complex.

These insights are instructive whether trying to theorize colonial or postcolonial contexts because this discourse on a particular kind of ethnographic object is always a commentary about the observer, as well. In other words, key about this image is not simply the way the African subject is positioned, but the anxieties through which basketball experts produce this kind of idea.

As I’ve already indicated, the tendency to project the inhabitants of non-Western worlds as “sweet and simple” (Trouillot 2003: 16) is well-known in European letters. This idea surfaces in the ideas of writers as diverse as Alexander Pope and Daniel Defoe.
Most famously articulated by Jean Jacques-Rousseau, the notion of this sentiment—often referred to as the myth of “noble savage”—nevertheless has a much older genealogy. Thus this conceptualization is not an artifact of the Enlightenment (Gonnard 1946, Trouillot 2003). Similar ideas arose, for instance, in the sixteenth century duels between Bartolomé de las Casas and Juan Gines de Sepúlveda about the inherent spiritual essence of the indigenous peoples of the Americas (André-Vincent 1980, Pagden 1982, Las Casas 1992[1552], Trouillot 2003).

At the same time, there is something unique about the way the image of a “noble savage” began to articulate with impressions of Africans and other non-Europeans in the nineteenth century. While debates concerning different species of subjectivity had linked “the observation of the savage and the hopes of utopia since at least 1516,” during this most period, all of a sudden, debates about the “nature” of the Savage were resolved not on the basis of Scriptures and other sorts of evidence, but on the “grounds of rationality,” and above all else, “experience” (Trouillot 2003: 17). An experience born as much from the materiality of conquest as the ideology of difference.\(^\text{86}\)

For, by portraying the real Africa as a dark recess, much akin to a bodily interior, it suggested that there was an intrinsic value in laying it bare to the probing eye of the European observer (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 90).

Which partially explains why the emergence of clinical pathology as a scientific practices, at this particular moment, was part of what enabled a broader language of empiricism (Foucault 1975):

To know was to raise to the light of scrutiny the dark secrets of life lurking in

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\(^{86}\) And even beyond this specific historical genealogy, these resonances might be born from the analogous structure of phallic economic and political power, whether colonialism or capitalism. In other words, in the same way that “camera lenses” can resemble “guns or Cubist penises” (Hirst 1988:n.p., also cited in Wallace 2002 “cameras sometimes wield the same power of guns and penises to abase the Other” (Wallace 2002: 7).
the body’s interior. The terms of this biological discourse would soon be extended to the African person as well (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 90).

As in the case of these players whose “raw athleticism” (Fussman 2003: 80) you, the viewer, can assess scientifically with your “eyes.” Thus to “schematize a protracted and contested process” (Trouillot 2003: 17) it seems as if this particular visual ideology for organizing and classifying “savage” subjects is carried into the present through first-person assessments of native potential, such as the one we find in Cal Fussman’s May 2003 publication.

There are other ways in which Rousseau’s formulation of the “noble savage” ideal, in particular, squares with that of Cal Fussman. The former developed a critique of capitalist modernity suggesting that, perhaps, there were consequences for being one of the world’s most economically advanced nations. Maybe human beings were happier and healthier when living—what he imagined to be—the simpler life. Maybe modernity harbors the power to both create and corrupt. Perhaps something is lost whenever so much is gained.

Fussman, too, supposes that Senegalese athletes play basketball for the love of the game. They—naturally—love sports. They are willing to play in “bare feet,” which is both and index of their technological inadequacy and a commentary on their impressive physical stature. This is why it was so important for him to index Shoeless Joe Jackson—instead of being driven by the greed, corruption, and lawlessness by which sports are characterized in the U.S. of late, Senegalese players have more “noble” inclinations. They are happy just to have the “opportunity” to play. Which is why articles like his become so important—in drawing attention to basketball in this locale,
Fussman saves Senegalese athletes from economic marginalization and rids U.S.
basketball of moral deprivation in one fell swoop.

In other words, Fussman’s racialized imagery reveals his sentiments about the
way Senegal fits into what has become a global imaginary of basketball talent, marketing,
and recruitment. At the same time, it indexes a particular understanding about why
Senegalese athletes are so important for the success of American basketball. Fussman’s
commentary, alongside parallel developments taking place inside the National Basketball
Association, reveal a nostalgia for a “prototypical” ballplayer—Michael Jordan—who
disappeared from the league a short time ago. This is nevertheless a player who—
through the precise calibration of skill, drive, and professionalism—can be realized once
again.  

For other reasons, as well, the references to Michael Jordan are telling. In the
minds of many spectators, he symbolized both the exorbitant profits to be gained from
mastery of the sport and the beautiful results that obtain from cultivating—what is
perceived to be—one’s “gift.” Much of the popular discourse about Michael Jordan
made his talents seem divine, supernatural even. Most of all he remained (most
obviously in the African American context) a potent symbol of basketball’s potential to
liberate economically marginalized peoples from chronic distress. Apparently, at least
according to the director of CNEPS, the same was true about the reception of his image
in Senegal.

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87 Maybe this was even the idea latent behind the Chicago Bulls’ decision to select Luol Deng in
the first round of the 2003 NBA Draft, though one can only speculate.
The CNEPS Director made it clear to me he was familiar with Jordan’s many advertisements and commercials and described them to me in detail. This dialogue fits with the way some writers have linked Michael Jordan’s fan base to the NBA’s ability to successfully market itself overseas (Halberstam 1999, La Feber 1999: 49-74). Clearly the ethnographic evidence collected from various sites in the Senegalese basketball complex confirms these claims. Consequently, Michael Jordan is an emblem not simply of the NBA, but of neoliberal capitalism’s ability to universalize a particular symbol. He is therefore, likewise, an index of globalization.

“...Sport could be a way to facilitate our development...”

The Director certainly had his own ideas about this phenomenon, “As part of globalization, young people want to discover the entire world, especially the United States.” At first I was skeptical about the insights that could be gleaned from such a vague explanation about player’s motivations and aspirations. As Ndoye elaborated his points, though, I realized that he was formulating a kind of historical argument, even though his periodization was suspect and his sequencing was inconsistent.

Given its key role in the formation of Thiès and CNEPS more specifically, French colonialism was a key ingredient in his globalist manifesto:

“Colonialism. It was the same [globalization-type] phenomenon, but especially for helping people find work. It was a key for us to [eventually] discover the United States. The Francophone countries discovered late that sport could be a way to facilitate our development.”

The notion that Francophone countries caught onto the United States ‘late’ matches the historical fact that in recent years, the U.S. has become increasingly important to Senegal

88 Besides Nike, Jordan has endorsed Gatorade, Oakley Sunglasses, McDonald’s, Wheaties, Wilson Sporting Goods, Rayovac Batteries…the list goes on and on (LaFeber 1999: 134).
as a political ally and as a destination for labor migration. This locale was not important to Senegalese people in the same way before the past decade or so. The United States, of course, had been a popular destination for some Senegalese migrants before, but the pace has intensified rapidly more recently. At least, as the Director was quick to point out, sport had not been used to promote development until now.

"To create a plan to help people do something [with their lives], we have [finally] formed a ‘joint venture’…"

Everything was in Wolof except the very last phrase, which had been spoken in English. Note the corporate terminology. American corporate terminology. This all was to be achieved…

"…with NGOs and the institutions of government, the study of sport and the formation of youth through sport, club teams and NBA teams."

Notice, each pair is made up of what initially seems to be a set of oppositional terms. In fact, they work in concert to “develop” youth through sport, as Ndoye suggests. Profoundly though, they usually appear as distinct domains to most Senegalese people, most of the time. They even appear that way at times to the Director, based on some of his responses to interview questions. But now, when trying to explain the new networks aligned to help young people make a living through sport, the connections between the elements of each pair are made manifest.

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90 Football academies, now springing up in different parts of the African continent are likewise referred to as ‘joint ventures.’

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“We are in the midst of globalization, but we have business to attend to at home. Localisation sous mondialisation ou le contraire n’est pas le développement [A localization that is trumped by globalization—or vice-versa—is not development]. We have to integrate our own reality with that of the world. We cannot have complete conformity....This is an element of positive globalization, a global economic system that does not require enslavement to the dollar.”

He must not have heard about George W. Bush’s 2003 visit to Gorée Island. At least, he did not mention this event although here—despite his apparent critique of Americanization—his paradigm for the limits of globalization suggest an orientation to U.S. fiscal policy, in particular, since Ndoye is concerned to avoid “enslavement to the dollar.”

The Director’s reference to slavery made me think about the ambitious project of the College d’Espoirs Nationaux [College of National Hope], a middle school housed at CNEPS. If indeed it shared the Director’s vision about the value of education, young players would be encouraged to carefully evaluate their minimal chances of becoming professional athletes. Maybe they would more carefully evaluate their faint chances of making it to the W/NBA, or to pro leagues in North Africa and Europe.

This approach nevertheless seemed disingenuous. At best, it was a little naïve. At worst, it was downright dishonest because it is clear that, although NGO officials officially promote education first and foremost, the escalating numbers of unemployed

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91 On July 8, 2003, when George W. Bush visited Gorée island, local inhabitants faced measures so laconic many of them used metaphors of slavery to express their discontent (chapter 1).
college graduates—and difficulties associated trying to pursue advanced study abroad—make that aspiration uninteresting if not altogether superfluous for most people.

In thinking about the Collège d’Espoir Nationaux [College of National Hope], I couldn’t help but recall that Espoir [Hope] was scrawled on a wall lining the football field on Gorée, though it didn’t seem to do provide much optimism for Senegalese youth in that context either.

The NBA’s encroachment into west Africa, and the increasing presence of Senegalese ballplayers abroad would all be associated with what Ndoye refers to as “globalization.” Of course, in the attempt to theorize this phenomenon, I have to avoid the tendency to treat it as a real presence in the world despite the propensity to do so by owners of capital (and those who aspire to secure their investments). Instead, globalization is most usefully seen as a set of historical processes that include the increasingly rapid circulation of finance capital (and therefore the increasingly spectral character of money; cf. Comaroff and Comaroff 2001, Appadurai 1996), new destinations for and rates of migration (Hoogvelt 2001, Diouf 2000, Ong 2003), new forms of information technology that link previously disconnected territories (Appadurai 1996), the outsourcing of labor from advanced to lesser capitalist societies (or, the re-industrialization of certain countries during a period of alleged post-industrialism in others; cf. Comaroff and Comaroff 2001), new international networks that build upon but are different from previous ones (Trouillot 2003, Cooper 2001), and—most of all—the profound sense that all of these developments have fundamentally altered the constitution of the world we knew (Mazzarella 2003, Turner n.d.[b]). Besides the concrete historical events and actors associated with these developments globalization, wherever it is found,
promotes a specific form of historical consciousness that must itself be interrogated. This provides a partial answer to the question Frederick Cooper (2001) posed not long ago: *What is the concept of globalization good for?* According to the article he puts forth, his answer would likely be *nothing* or at least *not much*. For Cooper, the developments people associate with globalization have been taking place for some time (cf. Trouillot 2003). What must be theorized, then, are the new circuits and networks that have arisen in the present moment. We cannot, in other words, assume that the world has either become more closely connected (the global-) or that this process is ongoing (the -ization): these are the two main conceptual limitations of the globalization concept as far as he is concerned (Cooper 2001).

And yet what Cooper’s insight points to, really, requires a distinction between globalization as an heuristic device and globalization’s status as a social fact. For many people, something they call “globalization” (or *mondialisation*, in the case of Francophonie) has fundamentally altered previous forms of sociality (Mazzarella 2003, Soros 2002, Appadurai 1996:3, 36). This belief, when mapped onto concrete changes in the scale and intensity of the processes Cooper would have us outline, requires us to address this phenomenal form in terms of the way people understand it to be taking place whether or not—from an ostensibly “objective” and scholarly scientific standpoint—we agree. As long as one does so with attention to globalization’s historical particulars, unique sociological configuration, and attendant cultural mediations, I am sure even Cooper would endorse such a theoretical project.

One could look at matters from another angle as well. While Cooper is right to note that globalization does sometimes imply a teleology, in another sense, it is a domain
of lived experience.\textsuperscript{92} It could be understood as a moment in which we exist, and not one that most people expect to be transcended any time soon.\textsuperscript{93} In other words, as I have suggested by referring to it as a historical predicament, it is a form of present experience that shapes the contours of lived realities in the world (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000) and must be theorized accordingly (Harvey 2002; Jameson and Miyoshi, eds., 1998).

In the ethnographic scenario that concerns us, the situation is made even more complex by the fact that \textit{globalization} is only one of the two species of internationalism that concerns us here: the other is \textit{diaspora}. The shifting racial demographics of the NBA that preceded the most prominent phase of its export overseas has created a very particular kind of spectatorship, especially among African people marginal to their national economies who, in the effort to secure labor by any means necessary—in the quest to develop a comparative advantage over other laborers using skills attainable locally—are encouraged by the success of African Americans to believe they \textit{too} could become NBA superstars. In the midst of this development, many have constructed diasporic links with their “imagined community” which is created here, not primarily through the medium of print capitalism (Anderson 1991) but through the imprint of stylish “body techniques.”

\footnote{In most discussions of globalization, in other words, it discussed as a matter-of-fact. This suggests the extent to which, for most people, it is something real (cf. Stiglitz 2003, Soros 2002, Hoogvelt 2001).}

\footnote{One of the strongest arguments for a contemporary economic predicament that is here to stay finds its expression in the work of Francis Fukuyama (1992) who argues this moment in capitalism constitutes the end of history, at least the end of feasible alternatives, thanks to the end of the Cold War. In its haste to abandon the socialism that formed the initial framework for postcoloniality, the Senegalese government seems to have embraced a like disposition. What makes neoliberalism unique, then, is not that it constitutes the “end of history” as such but that it signals the end of utopian aspirations; in Senegal, these once integrated socialism and nationalism. This stance has been abdicated in favor of a neoliberalism achieved through internationalism.}

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What we are dealing with here to some degree, in other words, is a uniquely diasporic globalization.

In a rather sophisticated theoretical exegesis of diaspora, Brent Edwards (2003) draws from the translation projects that took place between African American and Francophone writers in the inter-war period to show that the concept of diaspora articulated⁹⁴ there was constituted through a décalage. Borrowing a French term often used to describe “jet lag” because of its heuristic potential to elaborate both a gap in time and space, Edwards deploys the concept of décalage not simply because it carries the sense of something constructed (and therefore not essential, automatic, or inherent), but because the term—which takes its root from the French word caler meaning a “prop” or “wedge”—actually refers specifically to the removal of something that had been added to fix a prior instability (2003:13-15, 143, 282, 303)—a prosthetic leg, for instance. In other words, the previous position was one of uncertainty before the prop was even added. Edwards considers this a fitting metaphor for black internationalism, a reality achieved through the combined circumstances of enslavement, colonialism, Pan Africanist sentiments, and diasporic articulations that, while based on the illusion of race, correspond to lived social experiences in the world. Blackness, in other words, is structured by the articulation used to suture a gap in time and space. The diaspora, here, is an artificial construction that does not re-assert a previous sameness; instead, it works to camouflage a prior unevenness that nevertheless sustains disparate populations.

Fitting these insights to this special case suggests that even though something like a shared sense of blackness has been cultivated by different African American and Senegalese populations for some time (the Négritude movement being a prominent example), the relationship articulated between these groups is one that is always unsteady and one that shifts unpredictably, invariably. For that reason, diasporic populations are always constituted as much by tension and contradiction as agreement, and the networks through which they are connected must consistently be created anew in order for the linkages to be sustained.

For Senegalese ballplayers, the bonds are likewise forged by translation projects, but these concern performative and not literary devices, in contradistinction to the intellectual programs with which Edwards’ work is concerned. This is part of what makes it interesting to study relationships between African and American players being established in the era of globalization: in part due to the specific set of mediated forms transmitted to Senegalese populations (forms usually raced as black and gendered as male), economically marginalized youth are often encouraged to see basketball as a venue likely to facilitate their escape from chronic unemployment. But, this pursuit is made possible by the deep historical presence of an institutional infrastructure that effectively prepares young people for careers in sport in a place with few other skills to transmit to a population for whom education has usually long since been abandoned as a result of its superfluousness. This encourages one to think not simply about the way globalization facilitates new forms of consumption, but about the way it stimulates new forms of production in sites globalized products and practices reach.
At this point in the interview, Director Ndoye detoured into a moving philosophical tangent about the importance of education. In doing so, he made another reference to the Collège d’Espoirs Nationaux [School of National Hope\textsuperscript{95}], this time designating it the intellectual arm of the NGO S.E.E.D.

I was excited to know S.E.E.D.—the basketball academy I had learned about from Coach Ndiaye at ASFA—was housed right there at CNEPS. As the meeting drew to a close, he picked up the phone and made an appointment for me to meet next with Assane Badji, the S.E.E.D. Program Director.

Wrapping up my meeting with the Biram Ndoye, I headed straight for S.E.E.D.’s main office. I was curious to know more about this NGO’s role in promoting Senegalese youth who organize their futures using these and other institutional resources, even as various agencies seek to procure their talent. What I learned there took me back to the pages of ESPN, but the narrative wouldn’t be over this time when I closed the magazine.

**Sewing a S.E.E.D…then watching it grow**

In speaking with Assane Badji, I first wanted to get some details about when the initiative was created and why.

He confirmed—as I had previously been told—that S.E.E.D. was founded by Amadou Galo Fall, a Senegalese man who had played professionally in Tunisia for some years but who now worked in the United States. He had created the NGO so that young people with limited economic resources could nevertheless receive an education. At the same time, he wanted them to be healthy and of sound moral virtue, so he decided to make sports a mandatory component of the program. He had created what they called a

\textsuperscript{95} While the French term “college” refers more reliably to what is known as “middle school” in the U.S., this particular school includes high school students, hence the more inclusive terminology.
“basketball academy” (although residents of Thiès refer to it simply as *L’Académie*).

Young men take academic courses in the morning, then attend practice in the afternoons. In the summer, after competing in local tournaments and participating in camps, they are given a short recess to see their families who often reside in other parts of Senegal.

My thoughts immediately turned to the “Shoeless One” and, as I had done so often while conducting fieldwork in Senegal, I pulled out my copy of the May 2003 *ESPN Magazine* article to ask the S.E.E.D. program director if he knew the young man on the cover.

“Do you know how this story came about?” Badji asked.

Of course, I had no idea, so he introduced me to the events that had helped the new NGO sew baobab tree seeds in its field of dreams.

“In 2003, we had planned to have a basketball camp in Thiès, as we do every year,” he explained, “Usually the camp is funded by the Senegalese Basketball Federation. This time, they were short of money, so we tried our best to gather all available resources. At the same time, Galo Fall was putting S.E.E.D. (*le Sport pour l’Education et le Développement Economique*) together based on his idea of a Basketball Academy, but it didn’t exist yet then. This year is its first year.”

“Finally, DeSagana Diop (‘baby Shaq’),” a Senegalese man who plays for the NBA’s Cleveland Cavaliers, “decided to sponsor the camp. He sent the money, then later came to Senegal in time for the camp. He brought as well, Paul Hewitt, head coach of Georgia Tech’s basketball team. Each year they want to bring a different head basketball coach of an NCAA team.”

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Badji elaborated their motivations further, "We wanted the world to know about what we were doing, so we invited Cal Fussman of ESPN magazine, a friend of ours."

In Senegalese markets, "friends" are often built out of economic transactions. I had often been persuaded that the price being offered was one the vendor would only give to a "friend." Frequently, merchants would drape an arm across my shoulder in the affectionate embrace designed to conjure amitié, "My friend, come on... give me a good price." From this narrative, it wasn't clear to me whether Fussman had already been or then became a friend to the Senegalese players and coaches. At any rate, he was one now.

"When Fussman arrived, he was amazed by all the young people working out at the Corniche. Crowds of people running, lifting weights, doing martial arts... all without coaches or trainers. 'Senegalese people love sport.' He would say."

Clearly Fussman wasn't familiar with the colonial background to these developments and instead thought people living in this part of the world somehow possessed a greater propensity for athleticism. This interest, of course, can not be reduced to these material antecedents, but it ought not be theorized without them.

We continued.

"At the camp, Fussman saw one player playing without shoes. Just then, a former professional player from France took his shoes off and gave them to him. Fussman was so moved by all of this that, when he returned, he sent a reporter back to take pictures."

"How did she know where to go?" I wondered aloud.

"We met her and took her around to all the places Fussman had been."
Now seemed like a good time to inquire further what he knew of the “Shoeless One.” “So, do you know him?” I inquired, pointing to the picture.

“Yeah.” He seemed insulted, if not altogether indignant. “Fussman wanted to speak with him. *I’m the one* that told him he shouldn’t. ‘Don’t do it,’ I said. ‘You’re going to ruin his future. You’re going to make things really difficult for him.’

“So where can I find him?”

“He’s here.”


“No, here at the Academy. He’ll be out of class in a few minutes.”

I was excited about the possibilities. To finally be face to face with the “Shoeless One”...“So when can I meet him?”

“Meet him?” He looked incredulous. “No, that wouldn’t be such a good idea.”

I was floored. “Why?”

“Because, we want him to focus on his schoolwork. He doesn’t need the distraction.”

“But I’m not a reporter or anything, I’m just a student doing research,” I tried my best to reassure him.

“No, that won’t be possible.”

He decided instead that I could watch the team practice, as long as I remained a spectator.

I watched the practice and met the assistant coach who was excited to meet me and talk with me at length. I could not meet the Head Coach, though, as he was in Dakar
that day. That man was incidentally, Bengaly Kaba, the same onlooker who, in Fussman’s narrative, had charitably given his sneakers to the “Shoeless One.”

I also found out what Amadou Galo Fall, the founder of S.E.E.D., does for employment in the U.S. He is the Director of Recruitment for the Dallas Mavericks.

I entered the gym and noticed that, with the exception of one guard who was 6’4”, all of the other players hovered between 6’7” and 6’11”. I took a seat in one of the chairs against the far wall and sat down while I waited for the Assistant Coach to join me. As I interviewed him, scribbling furiously, players came over to greet the coach and elders or guests, as is customary, when they enter the facility. Each time one of them came over, I glanced up and nodded courteously before going back to the task at hand. That is, until one hand threatened to swallow mine completely.

I looked up to see where this giant hand lead and found the slightly more seasoned face of the ‘Shoeless One.’ This time, of course, he had the tennis shoes given him by his coach so I couldn’t use his old nickname. I could however now identify him by the number on his jersey: 75.

Seventy-five, or Soixante-quinze (pronounced like Sent quinze in Wolof) is the basic standard unit of economic transaction in Senegal. One wedge of butter or cheese at the boutique costs 75 francs CFA. One half of a baguette, considered enough for one person to consume for breakfast, costs the same amount.

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What irony that 75 was also the basic unit of economic transaction in the exchange between transnational corporations (ESPN, the Dallas Mavericks) and a Senegalese NGO.

I was incredibly disappointed and frustrated by the fact that I couldn’t speak directly to the ethnographic subject who, I believed, could tie all of these events and actors together. Part of me wanted to plan a covert operation. To sneak into CNEPS one day, armed with a digital camera and, perhaps, a camcorder so that I could photograph and interview this figure who seemed to epitomize the contradictions of Senegalese basketball.

This plan was not only improbable (since the CNEPS facility has only one entrance that is guarded twenty four hours a day) part of me believed it to be immoral. In some sense, I felt obligated to heed the words of the S.E.E.D. program director. Was there indeed something wrong with giving these athletes too much attention too early in life? Would I really have been a disruptive force in 75’s life?

Whatever the answers to these questions, the most compelling fact for me was the realization that the young athlete was being so heavily managed by the institutional forces at work. In a program ostensibly designed for his benefit, he was being shielded from avenues that could potentially draw attention to his plight and ultimately help him receive assistance, maybe even a scholarship if someone hearing about his struggle was sensitive to it. Seventy-five was, instead, barred from access to at least one medium of scholastic inquiry, and possibly, philanthropy.

Why? There are several possible reasons. Each one feeds back into the host of issues discussed above. Taking perhaps the most cynical view, it is possible that I was
not granted access to the basketball academicians simply because there was no clear evidence that it would benefit the program monetarily. Maybe my visit was simply a waste of time, from Badji's standpoint. Taking the analysis a step further, it is even possible that he had more to lose than to gain by putting the players in contact with me. Maybe he did not want to risk exposing them to the particulars of their predicament, to a detailed study of the program and its relationship to other agencies, or to the financiers of their future.

It's hard to know exactly what was happening as I was barred from gaining direct access to the youth, but one thing is certain: the official rationale given me is a spurious claim that cannot withstand critical scrutiny.

If indeed the program doesn't want players having contact with the outside world, why was ESPN magazine permitted to photograph 75 in the first place? Besides his picture in the land of the baobab there was another, which graced the cover of the issue in which he was featured. The shot shows him holding a basketball on which a Nike sign is prominently displayed. Two endorsements in one: for a magazine and sneaker conglomerate each, though it is doubtful the young player received any money for either. In fact, given NCAA rules, we ought to hope he didn’t, otherwise he will be ineligible to compete in college basketball, since amateur athletes are prohibited from receiving gifts. This cruel paradox resonates with what is taking place in the United States. The very youth responsible for exorbitant profits in the world of sport are prevented from benefiting directly from the revenues generated by their toil.

If I could go back to CNEPS, I think I would try to take a picture of 75, since I believe the value of this intellectual project outweighs the profit schemes of the
transnational corporations that successfully harvested his image. Yet, if I remain conflicted, maybe I can sidestep this ethical quandary by pursuing another course of action and take the sort of picture that even S.E.E.D could be comfortable with. I would take a picture, not of the player, but of something else that speaks to this tangle of passion and profit. Something equally fitting as part of this story.

I would just take a picture of his shoes.97

If the shoe fits...

I say I would take a picture of his shoes because that is the place philanthropic concerns, recruiting strategies, and the global infrastructure of basketball become distilled into a visual symbol that incorporates these distinct strands of comradely, contract, and commodification. For more than a decade, Nike has asked, “Is it the shoes?”—but now we can see it was a leading question.

Beginning with the Shoeless One’s feet, I want to detail the various actors involved with producing the young, male, Senegalese athlete as the local embodiment of success and as a promising athletic prospect for professional teams overseas. Senegalese basketball players are perfect for both roles. Disciplined and hungry—metaphorically and literally—these young athletes are poised to realize the dreams of the coaches, trainers, and recruiters who work hard—even if not as hard—on their behalf.

Understanding the “difference” between an athlete that has what it takes to “make it” and one who does not involves a calculus of skill and natural ability. But the criteria

97 Of course, for a variety of reasons, it is intensely problematic that I might hope to capture the image of the Shoeless One myself. Yet my desire to do so is structured by a series of contradictions that I consider to be inescapable, although the agent in question—in this case myself—does have options in terms of how it is negotiated. I theorize this predicament when this scenario is revisited in the next chapter. There, I use anthropological work on value and commodification to theorize the implications of photographic abstraction. I beg your patience in the meanwhile.
are slippery. Some players have tremendous potential. Others do not. Only some will get it right away. So how do you know when a player is a “natural”?

What are the signs of strength and endurance? While interviewing the SEED program director, I asked if what happened with the Shoeless One happened frequently: “Was it common for Senegalese basketball players to play in bare feet?” He, actually, seemed annoyed by my question.

“No! It’s not possible to play basketball barefoot out here...It’s too hot.”

When the Senegalese sun hits these concrete courts, apparently, the temperature is too much for human flesh to bear. But why would a sportswriter embellish this detail? Why recast the scenario beginning with the player’s feet? More to the point—and this question signals my point of departure—if you’re going to call a player the “Shoeless One” why feature a photograph that doesn’t show his feet?

Why this obsession with feet anyway? When Fussman first descended on Senegal, he was greeted by the image of “blurry legs” sprinting past him. Later, in Fussman’s account, Coach Ben gives the bare foot prodigy shoes from his own feet to clothe the young athlete’s naked feet, prompting Fussman to call this player the “Shoeless One.” The word “Fussman” comes to us from the German, where it literally means “the foot man.” So is this part of some metaphysical quest? Was Fussman uniquely ordained to find the bare foot prodigy on Senegalese shores? Or, does this have more to do with worldly desire? In other words, does Cal Fussman have a foot fetish, or is something else happening here?

My argument departs from a discussion of this particular image to outline distinctions in the way African and African American basketball players are
commodified. In what follows, I suggest—despite Gooding-Williams’ argument to the contrary—the process of commodifying these athletes is structured by forms of economic and symbolic value\(^{98}\) that emerge as different aspects of the way players are fetishized.

In returning to the idea of the fetish as a mechanism that was conceived in a commercial zone off the coast of west Africa, I am interested in the way its site of origin informs its theoretical merit. As a term that emerged in the context of transatlantic trade, the fetish encourages us to think about the economies of extraction—as part of a colonial legacy and in its most recent incarnations. After all, Senegalese athletes are selected for their height and produced as basketball players in Europe or the United States in much

\(^{98}\) If indeed, David Graeber (2001) is right to suggest, building on Turner (n.d.) that “value,” is essentially a way of articulating (cf. Hall 1991, 1981) social relations, one is inclined to ask how the commodity (as a site where multiple value registers crystallize) helps us reckon with the relationship between these overlapping affective and commercial spheres (cf. Eiss and Pedersen 2002). William Mazzarella’s (2003) brilliant ethnography forms a useful point of intersection for this problem. For that reason, this footnote explores his work at considerable length.

Mazzarella’s work on the Indian advertising industry suggests that, in its quest to manage difference, agents working in this commercial sector reproduce the structure of alterity that guided European colonialism. In drawing from local ideas of indianness to produce objects designed for exchange globally, Indian advertising executives embrace the commodity as their “principle mediating device.” This historical fact is consistent with much critical social theory which, in Mazzarella’s view, regards capitalism as an era plagued by hyper-commodification (2003: 38). Yet too many theorists, he believes, view commodification as “a one way process of abstraction” (Ibid). This idea brings with it the problematic assumption that, as capitalism becomes more advanced, it increasingly promotes the obliteration of concrete particulars in favor of abstract universals. For Mazzarella, this stance has undermined our ability to understand the complexity of commodification (Ibid: 40-45). For, rather than a “totalization narrative” convinced the commodity completely obscures lived experience, there is a tension between social role and economic aspiration—a dialectic between use-value and exchange-value—at the heart of each commodity (Ibid: 49). So that, besides the initial moment when commodities are produced, they are continuously made and remade, each time guided by new emotional and commercial inclinations.

Mazzarella traces the “totalization narrative” to the idea pioneered by G.W.F. Hegel that world history is driven by the triumph of Spirit, which finds its most complete expression in the State. Following this line of argument, Marx too was taken by this idea of history. Substituting “the State” for the “the Commodity,” Marx assumed it severed objects from the social roles they occupy so they could be made into general equivalents, for the purpose of exchange. Mazzarella (2003), instead, argues that “The life-world of the worker and the image-as-object always necessarily retain concrete elements that exceed the abstracting requirements of exchange-value” (Ibid).

I agree with Mazzarella that Marx developed a vision of history that is somewhat totalizing (especially if one follows the argument spelled out in the Communist Manifesto). At the same time, as I will show, Mazzarella’s idea of the dialectic that lies at the “heart of the commodity” is remarkably similar to a conception developed by Marx, not in his political tracts but in his work on the commodity fetish.
the same way that metropoles harvested raw materials from their territories to be refined elsewhere.

In thinking through the systemic effects of this Transatlantic trade in resources, one wonders why Cal Fussman hangs his hope for the future of Senegalese basketball on the potential exhibited by one player. Working against Kenneth Surin's (1990) warning that, to focus too intently on a particular athlete undercuts one's critical method, I explore the theoretical significance of the "Shoeless One" as an indication of the ideological scaffolding that drives the recruitment of Senegalese basketball players.

Athletes, in harnessing the aspirations of a collective, seem to embody the characteristics of the world-historical...—better yet—the charismatic individual. For Max Weber, people who wield charismatic influence are "neither appointed officeholders nor 'professionals'" but are instead charged with "specific gifts" (Weber, Roth, and Wittich 1968: 1112, as quoted in Edwards n.d.). These are people "endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities (Weber 1947: 358).

That charisma is "at once mystical and practical" reveals, for Erica Edwards (n.d.), "a privileged connection to the divine, evidenced by some form of miraculous proof." The charismatic leader, then, "is both gifted and gift himself: he is given divine authority, given to the people, and given for the sake of historical change."

I am especially interested in the way young athletes are understood, locally, as engines of "historical change." The commodity fetish rather than simply the commodity, for me, is the best way to capture the mystifications involved in producing the Senegalese basketball player for that end. Part of my argument, however, is that these athletes are
recruited as much for what they are not as what they are. Charisma, in Max Weber’s terms, indexes “devotion to the specific and exceptional…heroism[, the] exemplary character of an individual person” and includes, even more broadly, the “normative patterns” that person “reveal[s] or ordain[s].” Stemming from the NBA’s increased ambivalence toward African American basketball players Senegalese athletes, as I have mentioned, are imagined as the antidote for a cultural disorderliness that has infested the league in the post-Jordan-era.

In my quest to understand how Senegalese basketball players are valorized as having the characteristics needed to save their societies—from postcolonial economic distress—and the NBA from lawlessness, I am struck by the way they are infused with what seems to be a charismatic persona; but as I think Loïc Wacquant (1996: 25) is correct to say the “term ‘charisma’ is one of the most frequently used and abused in sports pages and commentaries about athletes,” I want, for the moment, to leave open the question of whether this term, provides the best way to theorize the social impact of the basketball player-turned-commodity-image.

The idea that Senegalese players will restore what basketball has lost fuses with the legacy of a basketball great as one player, more than any other, is used to gauge their chances.

**The profile of post-MJ nostalgia**

The fact that Fussman’s search for “tomorrow’s” basketball star began with soon after “Jordan announced his second retirement, in 1999” and “ended shortly after he announced his final retirement” (chapter 3) is crucial to the recruiting project he signifies.
When first speaking about the young star dubbed “Little Jordan,” Fussman responds, matter-of-factly, “his head is shaved like Mike’s.” While the youngster was known locally for having a style of play similar to MJ, it is the sportswriter who insists there is an uncanny physical resemblance.

As mentioned before, the legacy of Michael Jordan is central to the way basketball experts envision the kind of Senegalese athlete they seek to recruit (chapter 3). Beyond that, Fussman here reveals his preoccupation with a particular physical ideal—a clean-cut athlete (with a bald head, one as “smooth as caramel”)—rather than the braided, hip-hop persona characteristic of players (like Allen Iverson, Jermaine O’Neal) who populated the NBA in the immediate post-MJ period.

Most significant for me, besides the generational tension between these two players is the idea that, ever since Jordan departed, the league has been plagued by a certain hip hop aesthetic that ought to be carefully eradicated whenever it is not legislated against. This attitude appears in the ideological associations that emerge as part of the way African and African American players are sorted and discussed. One can say, without qualification, that while Fussman imagines himself commenting on Senegalese basketball potential, the account he provides reveals he has one foot in west Africa and one foot in terrain far more familiar to him.

**The fetish power of commodities**

Michael Jordan’s legacy is especially crucial to one, thus far underexplored, aspect of basketball’s global infrastructure—the sneaker industry. While Jordan was not the first player to endorse a shoe, his legacy is that—once his “Jordans” became a household
name—every star player who entered league subsequently. And, in this case of Lebron James, even before.

The power of this product hinges on popular ideas about the player himself. Michael Jordan’s most famous television ad in the United States during the 1990s replayed the historic scene from his appearance in the 1988 Slam Dunk contest where he took off from the free-throw line and placed the ball in the hoop, effortlessly, in slow motion. Game after game, people saw Jordan sky over helpless defenders with his aerial talents. “Is it the shoes?” Spike Lee asked in the classic Nike commercial he directed. Maybe. But Jordans certainly didn't do that for anyone else. Nike’s trademark symbol for Jordan was the silhouette of a man leaping into the air, his arm stretched directly upward, his legs cocked at 45-degree angles, toes straight. This insignia is a telling index of Jordan’s historical import. Indeed, what is perhaps most remarkable about Michael Jordan was not just that he was the greatest athlete basketball had ever seen, or that basketball started to rival football as the world’s most dominant sport under his watch. The most incredible feature of the Jordan phenomenon was the way that he became a living metaphor for all that disenfranchised blacks could possibly achieve, instantiated in specific moments of his characteristic slam dunks. His gravity-defying tactics inspired awe and wonderment, encouraging people to project their ambitions onto him as he became a fetish endowed with their most sacred hopes and ambitions. This was as true for the fans who idolized and emulated him as it was for the owners of capital who wanted to secure the advertising power of his image.

The commodity fetish is usually understood as a commodified symbol
that systematically obscures the social relations that produced it (Graeber 2005). Let's take an example I have already discussed: Air Jordan tennis shoes. In the classic reading of commodity fetishism that has evolved especially in the anthropological tradition over the years—the pair of shoes is assumed—by the layperson—to be valuable in and of itself. But, according to this critical move, the tennis shoes are really valuable because they are produced so cheaply in Indonesia (likely through exploitation of child-labor) and then sold for an outrageous price in the U.S. (Kaplan 2006: 147). Thus, the shoes mask the relationship advanced capitalist nation and postcolony, between one transnational corporation and many economically marginalized, brown subjects.

This is certainly one aspect of the commodity’s fetish power. But additionally—and even more powerfully, I think—the commodity fetish promotes a series of mystifications. To use this same example, the shoes are not simply a symbol of savage capitalism. Many young athletes who wear them genuinely believe the shoes make them perform better. Or that they are more comfortable than any other shoe. That they last longer than other shoes. Some of these ideas are shored up by scientific research and development. I know one designer who believes shoes made by Converse and Nike (who owns Converse) are genuinely better products, having survived a battery of tests and trial runs, while other companies—like Reebok—use celebrities to endorse a product they haven't properly tested. This tension between unchallenged mystical inclinations and objective, scientific standards is part of the way the concept of the commodity fetish works as a critical device.

"The Marxian theory of fetishism...is a critical, materialist theory of social desire. It presents modern political economy as a real social metaphysics (an institutional

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objectification of human temporality in the form of labor-power, surplus-value, and credit-money)…” (Pietz 1993: 129).

This suggests the idea of “commodification,” as typically invoked, is too meager a concept to account for the role of sport under neoliberal conditions. The male athletes commodified in the pages of ESPN are subjects whose status as “youth” endows them with scores of free time, they use in recreational activity. Simultaneously, their use of that time locks them into a particular relationship with the global infrastructure of competitive sport. This network makes use of these forums as “tournaments of value” (Appadurai 1986) that cancel out inferior players as recruiters prospect for the “One” player deserving of the capital investment: the next best prospect for an emerging system of assessment and investment ideally designed to guarantee a high rate of return. The Senegalese players most heavily recruited are those with a propensity for height: in this way, human difference is part of the calculation designed to yield a valued product. These particular athletes, then, harness the collective aspirations of an entire generation of Senegalese people as engines of “historical change.”

And yet, the extent to which this operation is individualized begs the question: does the Senegalese basketball player at present truly qualify as a charismatic icon? Does he in any way represent, what Weber considers to be, a “gift of grace”?

Consider this recent ad for the most recent Nike Air Jordan’s—the 21’s. “Michael’s game,” it says, “has always been a mix of how he played, who he is, and what he stands for. It’s his Heart, Desire, Vision and Creativity. It’s his Grace, Strength, and Will…They are what made Michael the greatest to ever play. They are Michael’s DNA.”
Which is why these blood-red shoelaces intertwine to take the shape of deoxyribonucleic acid. This is both a gesture to Michael’s otherworldliness and to the ostensibly biological essence responsible for tremendous physical feats. Despite this argument, from my standpoint, neither the Senegalese nor African American basketball player fulfills the definition of charisma. Instead of transforming authority structures through miraculous acts of ingenuity, the athlete’s innovation is bounded by specific ritual performances, structured by the shot clock, conducted in anticipation of the whistle. Beyond that, ethnographic studies of athletic competition teach us that athletes “make themselves” through specific disciplining projects oriented towards some vague sense of victory. Instead of promoting social rupture, athletes typically reinforce the meritocracy that undergirds sport in the era of advanced capitalism. Sport, as “the art of competition” (Early 1996:5) turns athletes into “ritualists” preoccupied with an ascetic suffering in the quest to promote their “bodily craft[s]” (Wacquant 1996: 27). The redeployment of this carefully crafted technique occasionally results in a stunning athletic achievement that, of course, tempts us to draw parallels between the athlete in question and the major figures in world history—with those who wield political power in the postcolony, for instance—but this relationship says more about the feelings these physical feats inspire in us than it does about the lasting social consequences of these performances, than it does about their relevance as moments that reshape the structures of authority that regulate social life which is, ultimately, a prerequisite for the paradigm of charismatic authority. To focus too much on the power of the athletic icon ignores the techniques we deploy to valorize the particular objects of our devotion and, in doing so, confuses the symbol with the social relations its camouflages.

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To build on this idea, the same one as our classic definition of commodity fetishism, to obsess over the qualities of the particular commodity (even the dialectic between use-value and exchange-value that lies at the heart of it) is to lose sight of the fact that the commodity offers a map of social relations.

But the notion of a commodity fetish is by no means flawless as an heuristic device. It relies after all, on a categorical difference between the world of human activity and the world of objects. This conceptual divide, in my view, is unsustainable.

U.S. legal history supports my claim: in the case of Moore v. Regents of the University of California, a cancer patient sued the state University system when the cell material extracted from his spleen was turned into the “Unique T-Lymphocyte Line” expected to help other cancer patients. After his own successful operation, Moore took his physicians to court for transforming his personal “property” into a commodity. Moore ultimately lost the case since, the courts ruled, the public benefits of this medical development were the most crucial issues to consider (Palmié forthcoming: 45). But this does not take away from the fact that the biological material harvested was indeed a human specimen.

When Mathieu Tokpanou of Benin went missing on October 12, 2001, only to resurface on October 15th with—according to one witness—his eyes and genitals were removed, an unidentified source suggested the body parts were used as part of a fetish ritual, the local idea being that such “fetishes” are more powerful “when the body is mutilated while the victim is still alive” (Levin n.d.: 3).

Building on the idea that the technological efficacy of a fetish is, in some measure, derived from its life, perhaps we ought to consider what it means to be an organ
donor when we consider the fact that, after being extracted from a human being who is making her transition, the organ is immediately plunged into ice so it can be kept “alive” until it must be transplanted into the body of another human being.

A final example illustrates my point cogently. If we consider the kind of ritual objects usually deployed in African and African-derived religious rituals, for instance, the elements of these altars often contain human remains. In the nganga ritual complexes of Afro-Cuban religion, one finds practitioners harnessing spiritual power through figurines woven with human hair, draped in blood, encrusted with pieces of bone, and hair. These elements are used so that ritual specialists can, in the words of Stephan Palmié (forthcoming: 9), “gain control over the spirits of dead human beings, in order to harness their powers to curative or destructive ends.” These techniques derive their power from two conditions. The first rests on the idea that there is an intimate bond between the spirit of a person and the human remains that constitute her material traces. The second intimates the seizure of bodily remains is of no consequence unless the spirit has expressed consent, which explains why the spirits in question often have names and personalities, and why ritual specialists must appease the spirits through gifts and other tokens of affection in order to avert mystical attacks.

My aim in providing these examples is to suggest that the notion of a “commodity fetish” does not provide a critique that is sophisticated enough. Because, to use the concept of a “fetish” as a critical device, in the way this term is characteristically deployed, relies on the false assumption that there is a discrete division between human beings and objects. That is the only way one can sustain the position that human beings misrecognize objects as having human capacities and capabilities. But what if, as these
examples suggest, the division between human and object is rather more fluid (Appadurai 2006)? What if, in fact, the tendency to objectify some relationships and humanize others—whether we are dealing with animate or inanimate objects—is the true mark of what makes us human?

This insight does not occlude using the fetish as part of a critical vocabulary. Instead it simply suggests that even that relationship—between human beings and their fetishes—relies on a certain form of misrecognition. But becoming clear about the historical processes and institutional sites that cement mystified notions, seems to me, the first step in understanding how they work. And since this critical device is borrowed from a tradition that believes its own categories will give way to more powerful ideas during the course of struggle, this seems not a bad way, at least to start.

This idea that the commodity fetish is—in some small measure at least—human, provides a window commodities that resonate with parts of the human anatomy. Like tennis shoes designed to feel like socks. Better yet, those designed to feel like you’re not wearing anything (which, if they were really successful, would eliminate the need for the shoes altogether, wouldn’t they)? This insight also helps explain why Detroit Piston fans, obsessed with Ben Wallace, are willing to purchase afro wigs or “Ben ‘Fros”—proximity to the object is a recurring theme in ritual technologies.

In scenarios such as these, the body as a “constellation of relations and processes” (Comaroff 1992: 72) is objectified in contexts such as these through techniques of commodification and the types of reification they entail.

In the story I have shared about Senegalese basketball, both the tennis shoes and photograph serve as productive technologies that refine the athlete that recruiters seize
upon as a natural resource they hope to refine in the U.S. Just as the “Afro-Cuba nganga complex” was born from “a violent past of dehumanization under slave-labor-driven forms of plantation-production,” these athletes are part of an infrastructure that reproduces the triangular trade of the Middle Passage, and the extractive economies that are associated with colonialism. But these new commercial avenues are, most of all, guided by the fantastic aspirations that derive from new possibilities to commodify athletes who—like those who sell their own organs in India’s illicit economies—view their bodies as providing the only value they can access. The commodification of the human body, finally, provides the most difficult challenge concerning our efforts to understand the relationship between humans and objects; how we demarcate the boundaries of each. Which is why, even during the original thirteen colonies of the United States, you could have discourses circulating that African people are sub-human—or partially human—even as colonists passed laws ensuring that the offspring of planters and Negro women would be slaves. Laws they needed because of all the children they fathered with these non-humans.

This historical example from U.S. history provokes us, in closing to wonder how Cal Fussman got to Senegal in the first place. In the words of Assane, the SEED program director, “We begged him to come. We wanted the world to see what we were doing…” Consequently, grace came in the form of the Shoeless One, a divine gift captured by Sarah Friedman’s optic which, it seems, was structured by the aspirations of Senegalese basketball experts. Which leads us to the question whose implications I will pursue, very briefly, before closing: why does this new Academy go by the acronym SEED when its meaning, Sport pour l’Education and Development Economique, would spell SEDE in
French? SEED—Sports for Education and Economic Development—only works in English, which provides some idea of the way this institution is oriented. And I daresay the fact that the U.S. now outpaces Europe in the scramble for Senegalese athletes, is in large measure the result of its increased political and military might in the post-World War II period, especially in terms of its ability to develop superior technology as the grounds for solidifying its status as the archetype of a civilized—or to put it in fashionable terms, a democratic—nation. This technological production—again, in the form of photographs and tennis shoes—reinforces the idea and material fact of its global dominance.

**Excessive fetishism—in place of a conclusion**

In his discussion of one particular photograph in his “Little History of Photography,” Walter Benjamin suggests, “there remains something that goes beyond the testimony to the photographer’s art, something that cannot be silenced” (Benjamin 1999: 510).

The same could be said of Sarah Friedman’s photographs. The baobab shot of the Shoeless One shows him to be wearing two pairs of basketball shorts, a convention among African American athletes. And, although Fussman seems committed to save the NBA (in part from hip hopification) through disciplined, noble and naïve African ballplayers, this little bit of photographic “excess” suggests there is more to the story than what we are told, either by Fussman or the Shoeless One. Maybe if Fussman had spoken to the Shoeless One, as I did, he would have learned that he speaks English very well, a language he taught himself by watching T.V. Maybe even ESPN.99

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99 But then, given the trajectory of the Shoeless One’s image, he might never, truly, have had the chance to speak—at least not say whatever he wishes to say. For Marx (1990: 176-77) the commodity, though ventriloquized “through the mouth of the economist” does not speak. Instead, these objects
By considering the dialectical power of images, we are returned to the question I posed earlier ("Why was the Shoeless One photographed without his feet?")", I later learned the Shoeless One was not, in fact, barefoot when he became the object of Fussman’s devotion. He was wearing *tic tics*, cheap, plastic sandals sold at neighborhood boutiques. They are difficult to walk in, much less play in. And yet, wearing them is, obviously, not the same thing as being barefoot. The work of this savage index is a product of the way these players are fetishized by the journalist who gazes upon them as nature’s gift to the American sporting world.

This partly explains Fussman’s focus on feet. If the Senegalese player is marked by his bare feet, the African American player is characterized by the greed and communicate through the semiotic codes and illusory sensations they provoke. Fred Moten (2003: 6-11), by contrast, in a reading that "starts," conversely, "with the historical reality of commodities who spoke—of laborers who were commodities before, as it were, the abstraction of labor power from their bodies," insists "commodities" do in fact "speak." For Moten "the commodity who speaks, in speaking, in the sound—the inspird materiality—of that speech, constitutes a kind of temporal warp that disrupts and augments not only Marx but the mode of subjectivity that the ultimate object of his critique, capital, both allows and disallows" (11).

The twist and tumble of Moten’s gymnastic prose performs the curious, contradictory, and unstable quality of the commodity Marx makes explicit. For precisely that reason, I am more at home with Moten’s appreciation for the semiotic ambiguity the commodity conveys than his insistence that Marx can be "augment[ed]" by some "resounding speech…the commodity cuts and carries" (11). As "speech" for Moten is the commodity’s hydraulic force, his reading renders it teleological—his entire critique of Marx relies on the commodification of an object Moten imagines to always already have been on its way to commodification (the fact that plots to secure Africans for labor were—though not altogether whimsical at least, in certain moments, conditioned by matters of circumstance (Palmié 1995: 40), for instance—escapes Moten). For me, instead, it is of crucial importance whether an object’s commodity potential is ultimately realized (as would not occur, for instance, in the case of Africans who escaped, committed suicide, expired, or were murdered before they could be exchanged).

Following Appadurai (1986), I acknowledge that anything can be commodified—or, more precisely, that any entity can be objectified and subsequently commodified—yet I think it important to stress that objects do not always complete the process wherein they might officially acquire exchange value. In other words, "While one wishes"—as I gather does Moten—that the value of a commodity, "exceeds its mere commodity value, its value as an economic object is a necessary modality of its existence" (Pietz 1998: 246) for it to be so categorized. In short, commodification does not always occur, even when that is the express aim of the commodity producer.

I am most excited about Moten’s project a few steps before he concludes his critique of Marx, that space where, in reconsidering the way commodities communicate to us, he emphasizes, the “breaking of...speech, the elevating disruptions”—or absences—“of the verbal that take the rich content of the object/commodity’s aurality outside the confines of meaning precisely by way of [a] material trace.” (6). “Trace[s],” I would argue, like Sarah Friedman’s (in)famous photos of the Shoeless One.
materialism characteristic of basketball today because of his irrational attachment to tennis shoes. In fact, the tennis shoe, is part of this player’s DNA, as the Jordan ad communicates, implicitly or explicitly.

When explaining how he came up with Duane Wade’s sneaker design, Duane Lawrence said, “The main inspiration was Wade, who is clean cut but dynamic on the court…Wade is so smooth. He moves around the court comfortably and strikes unexpectedly. The shoe is the same way.”

So when Coach Ben handed the Shoeless One his own shoes, he did more than offer this gift as part of a recruiting effort. He provide him with the technology he would need to put in the hours it takes to become a certain kind of athletic prospect, as part of a particular institutional infrastructure, in the context of a competitive traffic for basketball, in this part of the world. Coach Ben, in other words, led him into the relationship between time, work-discipline, and neoliberal capitalism that turns him into a shoeless fetish capable of articulating a dialectic of race that structures popular attitudes of black basketball players—on both sides of the Atlantic—leaving Senegalese players with big shoes to fill: preferably Jordans.
Coda
When all that’s left is center

In 2005, Gallo Fall orchestrated a trade that brought DeSagana Diop from the Cleveland Cavaliers to the Dallas Mavericks. Having Diop in Dallas had the effect of joining an up-and-coming Senegalese ballplayer with one of his countrymen, who had also become one of the NBA’s top recruiters. Suddenly matters of kin and country seemed implicated in a scenario one might imagine would primarily involve scouting the league’s best talent. This is not to suggest the Mavericks decision to acquire Diop could only have occurred as a result of Fall’s nationalist desires—there is insufficient evidence for such a claim. Instead, the significance of this event is that it underscores a historical conjecture in which two Senegalese stars—one player and one executive—show up on a team that is arguably the league’s best. In this context it is not insignificant that Diop was brought to the Mavericks so that he could play the position of center.

The role of center in the history of US basketball has been changing in recent years. While players filling this role were once exceeding tall, some teams in recent years have switched to athletes with greater shooting range, speed, and quickness so a center can match up against the opposition’s small forward or power forward, when necessary (Dupree 2006). The player who typifies this trend to redefine the center position is 6’8” Boris Diaw of the Phoenix Suns. A new addition to his team, Diaw filled in for Steve Nash at point guard during the 2005-06 season when the latter was injured, and played both small and power forward on different occasions. Later, when the Suns lost three players capable of playing center to injuries sustained during the course of the season, Diaw stepped right into the pivot, posting some of the league’s best numbers at
the post, leading his coach to grant him that position permanently, and changing league-wide perceptions about what sort of player can adequately serve in that capacity. NBA centers have, historically, exceeded seven feet in stature, as does DeSagana Diop, of the Dallas Mavericks.

After arriving in Dallas, Diop immediately toned his physique, improved the quality of his play, and suddenly earned the esteem of journalists and critics for helping the Mavericks become even more dominant in the league. That year, when his team battled the Miami Heat for the NBA’s World Championship, Diop dueled with Shaquille O’Neal underneath the basket—each man played the center position for his respective team.

But in the series right before they faced Miami for the league championship, the Dallas Mavericks played the Phoenix Suns, meaning DeSagana Diop matched up against Boris Diaw—a showdown that pitted the center of the future against the classic model. The drama was heightened by the fact that both men are Senegalese (Boeck 2006).

Diaw, who played professional basketball in France before coming to the NBA, is the son of famed Senegalese high jump champion. His mother, Elizabeth Riffiod, is one of the greatest centers in the history of French women’s basketball. Diop, by contrast, left his native Senegal to play high school basketball in Virginia, before moving immediately to the NBA. Through divergent paths of migration, they showed up in head-to-head competition on two of the league’s best teams.

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100 "DeSagana Diop flung aside his protective face mask within minutes and then, broken nose and all, completely altered Avery Johnson’s no-big-men experiment against the small and speedy Suns" (Caplan 2006).
Although Senegal has produced more NCAA basketball players than any other countries besides Canada—and although the number of NBA players who hail from this country has steadily increased in recent years—it will take additional time before it becomes clear whether Senegalese fame in US professional basketball is a flash in the pan or evidence of a systematic recruitment strategy that has blossomed in some sustained way. Whatever the consequences, in this complicated matrix, US professional basketball has emerged as a principal matrix through which Senegalese actors reposition themselves. At a time when the requisite characteristics for a center are being dialectically reconstituted, Senegalese players have shown up on both sides of the equation and are now, as well, in the position to make a decision about how the league proceeds.

Early in this dissertation I discussed how soccer figures in governmental efforts to harness the nation in support of increased economic liberalization (Chapters 1 & 3). In the sphere of basketball, by contrast, the state is conspicuously absent. Yet, this is a feature of neoliberalism: the state, in certain domains, maintains a spectral presence, granting actors whose activity support its interests freedom from the surveillance maintained in arenas that, from the standpoint of the national government, require stricter scrutiny (Ong 2006). The state, at the same time, is not altogether absent, even from these spaces—it maintains the authority to enact political spectacles (of the kind witnessed at Gorée)—that testify to its role as ultimate sovereign (chapter 3). And, indeed, the power to determine which actors should be granted exalted status is one reserved exclusively for the national government, as the foregoing events suggest. The issue of which actors serve as representatives for the nation is more vexed, of course, in
part because it is never clear which actors will be commodified, under what circumstances, and for which purposes (chapter 5). And, the commodification of athletes, even where it does occur, is necessarily incomplete. In this shifting social matrix, youth celebrate their love for basketball, transnational agents perfect their recruitment strategies, and state officials turn a blind eye toward, but never fail to honor, the superstar athletes who push beyond the nation’s borders (chapter 4)—the youth positioned at the center of a global basketball infrastructure that maintains a watchful eye on the Senegalese ballplayers presently at play in the postcolony.
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